FAST TRACK TO LITERACY

Kentucky district targets struggling readers in urban schools

THOMAS R. GUSKEY, MARCO A. MUÑOZ, AND JENNIFER ABERLI

Improving the literacy skills of struggling high school readers remains one of the greatest challenges educators face today. Students who are two or more years behind grade level in their language arts skills have little chance of successfully completing a rigorous program of studies in high school and are the most likely to drop out. Accelerating the learning progress of such students is the explicit goal of the Ramp-Up Program in Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Ky. Jefferson County Public Schools is a diverse, metropolitan school district that includes 150 schools serving approximately 97,000 students, 55% of whom come from economically disadvantaged homes and qualify for free or reduced lunch benefits.

PLANNING

In planning the Ramp-Up Program and its accompanying professional development, school and district leaders followed the backward planning model outlined by Guskey (2001a & b). They began by identifying student learning outcomes they wanted to improve and evidence believed to best reflect those outcomes. In this case, literacy skills and particularly the reading comprehension skills of struggling high school students were of foremost importance. The evidence best reflecting those skills was students' reading comprehension scores on the Kentucky Core Content Test (KCCT), which is part of Kentucky's statewide assessment system.

Next, school and district leaders sought to identify the instructional practices that, if implemented well, would be most likely to bring about those improvements. An investigation of research on practices and programs

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designed to enhance the literacy skills of secondary school students led them to the Ramp-Up Program. This program involves a two-year course designed to accelerate the learning progress of high school students who are two or more years behind grade level in their English and language arts skills. Activities focus on helping students make rapid progress toward becoming fluent readers, developing wider vocabularies, and comprehending grade-level texts through a variety of instructional strategies. Pilot testing of the program showed it to have a significant positive effect on students' scores on norm-referenced reading and language arts assessments (Muñoz, 2007). Another study evaluated the effectiveness of the program and the associated professional development model, focusing on the effect on students' scores on criterion-referenced reading assessments (Muñoz, Guskey, & Aberli, 2009).

Third, leaders considered the organizational support needed to guarantee high-quality implementation of the Ramp-Up Program. Two aspects of support seemed most crucial: the ongoing, sustained support of building leaders and ready access to expertise in order to address problems quickly and efficiently. To ensure building leaders' support, the program was first explained at a special gathering of all secondary school principals. In addition, principals and lead teachers were included in introductory professional development sessions where the necessary follow-up and support were outlined. To make certain that program and literacy expertise were readily available, a program coordinator was appointed to guide the initial training, conduct follow-up sessions, and provide ongoing support and assistance to teachers involved in implementing the program.

School district leaders, in consultation with literacy experts and educators familiar with the Ramp-Up Program, then outlined the knowledge and skills high school teachers would need to implement the program with a high degree of fidelity. This became the basis for designing the initial professional development and follow-up sessions. The format made clear that high-quality implementation would require participating teachers to have multiple, structured opportunities to develop materials and practice their skills, receive feedback on their efforts, and then collaboratively adapt the materials and further refine their approaches.

THE RAMP-UP PROGRAM

The theoretical framework behind the Ramp-Up Program stems from current research on high school literacy. The program includes:

- **Independent reading** in which students read a book of their own choosing at their ability level (Allington, 2001; Beers, 2003);
- **Read-aloud/think-aloud/talk-aloud,** where students hear proficient readers make explicit their thoughts and the problems they encounter as they read (Davey, 1983; Hahn, 2002; Richardson, 2000);
- **Work period:** Whole- and small-group instruction that provides students with texts appropriate to their level and guides them in applying what they have learned when reading in other materials (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996);
- **Work period:** Writing instruction in which students learn the stages of the writing process and then write in the genres they are reading (Pearson, 1994); and
- **Cross-age tutoring** that pairs older students with elementary students for tutoring in reading (Labbo & Teale, 1990).

- Professional development achieves learning goals by implementing coherent, sustained, and evidence-based learning strategies that improve instructional effectiveness and student achievement.
- Professional development informs ongoing improvements in teaching and student learning.
- Professional development regularly assesses its effectiveness.

IMPLEMENTATION

Principals nominated teachers for the Ramp-Up Program based on their schools' needs and the teachers' agreement. A total of 40 10th-grade English and language arts teachers

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from 18 high schools were selected to participate the first year. These teachers took part in a three-day summer institute in which they learned about the elements of the Ramp-Up Program and worked collaboratively to develop implementation strategies, practice, and gain feedback. All teachers also attended five, three-hour follow-up sessions every six weeks during the school year. These follow-up sessions, led by the program coordinator, were held after school and played a vital role in program implementation. They offered participating teachers the chance to share their successes, discuss their problems, and then collaborate to develop workable solutions. They also gave teachers time to cooperatively plan additional instructional units and accompanying classroom activities.

High-quality implementation would require participating teachers to have multiple, structured opportunities to develop materials and practice their skills, receive feedback on their efforts, and then collaboratively adapt the materials and further refine their approaches.

In addition, the program coordinator scheduled regular visits to participating teachers' classrooms to offer assistance, feedback, and support. Teachers also could gain immediate help through phone calls or online access to the program coordinator. The program coordinator would also schedule additional visits, sometimes demonstrating techniques or modeling effective strategies on an as-needed basis.

In the second year of implementation, teachers new to the program were nominated either by school principals or by experienced Ramp-Up teachers. The new teachers participated in a similar three-day summer institute directed by the program coordinator but facilitated by experienced program veterans. All experienced teachers also took part in a one-day refresher institute in which they reviewed their previous work and collaboratively planned for the next year. Both new and experienced teachers were included in the follow-up sessions and the classroom visits by the program coordinator during the second year.

Jefferson County Public Schools
Louisville, Ky.

Number of schools: 90 elementary, 24 middle, 21 high, 20 other learning centers
Enrollment: 95,218 students
Staff: 6,000+ teachers
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	53.0%
Black:	35.9%
Hispanic:	4.7%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	2.6%
Native American:	0.1%
Other:	3.7%

Limited English proficient: 5.3%
Languages spoken: 95
Free/reduced lunch: 62.2%
Special education: 14.3%
Contact: Marco A. Muñoz, evaluation specialist, marco.munoz@jefferson.kyschools.us

EVALUATION

The five-level evaluation model outlined in *Evaluating Professional Development* by Guskey (2000) provided our framework for evaluating of the effectiveness of the Ramp-Up Program. The model begins with participants' reactions to the experience (Level 1), considers participants' learning (Level 2), looks at organization support and change (Level 3), documents participants' use or implementation (Level 4), and finally assesses impact on student learning (Level 5). Beginning with the desired student outcomes and then working backward through the five levels in the backward planning process (Guskey, 2001a & b) compelled us to address the most crucial evaluation issues before program implementation began (Muñoz, 2005).

Our evaluation was an exploratory, quantitative investigation supplemented with qualitative data to clarify issues brought to light by the quantitative evidence. For Level 1, we used pre- and post-satisfaction questionnaires administered online following the summer institute and after each of the follow-up sessions during the school year. This anonymous questionnaire consisted of 21 items covering the content, context, process, and results of each professional development experience.

At Level 2, we employed pre- and post-knowledge assessments for all teachers taking part in the summer institute and refresher institute. This assessment included six rating-scale items developed by the program coordinator with assistance from the district's research department. Items measured the degree to which participants acquired the intended knowledge and skills from the professional development.

For Level 3, we assessed school and district organizational support using another questionnaire developed collaboratively by the program coordinator and an evaluation specialist from the district's research department. This questionnaire included 15 rating-scale items designed to assess professional development support, program implementation support, and other forms of organizational support and change. We administered this questionnaire in the fall to all Ramp-Up teachers and to the principals/administrators from their schools to check for agreement and consistency in response patterns.

To determine participants' use of the new knowledge and skills at Level 4, we used direct observations. Two trained observers visited Ramp-Up teachers' classrooms in the fall and in the spring to determine both the degree and quality of program implementation. To guide their observations, we created an observation rubric based on critical program ele-

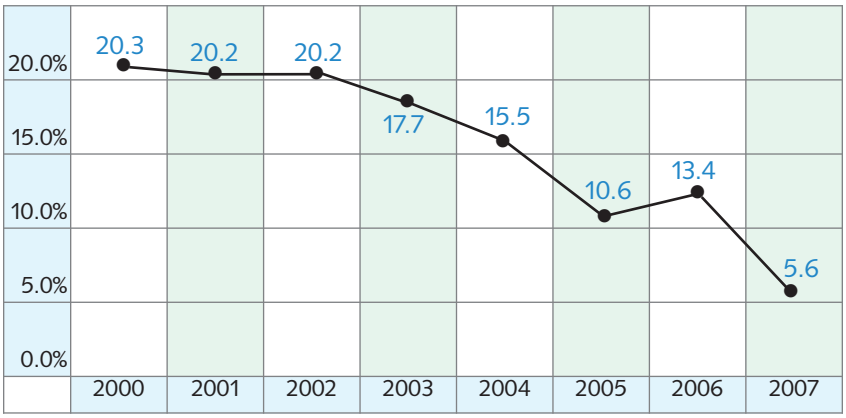
ments related to academic standards; rituals and routines; and pedagogy, literacy, and assessment. Observers rated their observation of these program elements as: (1) nonproductive practice, (2) limited practice, (3) partially operational practice, and (4) fully operational practice. We shared the rubric with teachers during the summer institute and also used the results from each observation to offer teachers guided feedback on their implementation efforts.

For assessing the impact of Ramp-Up on the students at Level 5, we used a matched treatment control group, pre-posttest design (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Predictive Assessment Series (PAS) results were used as a diagnostic measure to match treatment and control students on their prior achievement. Results from the statewide assessment in reading (Kentucky Department of Education, 2005) provided the primary evidence of the program's effects. We divided the Ramp-Up classrooms into high- and low-implementation groups based on the classroom observation results (Level 4) to determine the influence of the degree of program implementation. We also compared high- and low-implementation classrooms to matched comparison (control) classrooms from the same participating school.

Our findings revealed strikingly positive effects at all levels from the Ramp-Up program.

High school reading novices (2000-07)

PERCENT OF STUDENTS SCORING AT THE NOVICE LEVEL IN READING



Source: Kentucky Department of Education.

RESULTS

Our findings revealed strikingly positive effects at all levels from the Ramp-Up program. They also helped us determine where changes would likely be needed to improve the program's effectiveness.

Level 1 data on participants' reactions showed that participating teachers were exceptionally satisfied with their professional learning experiences during the institutes and follow-up sessions. We attribute this primarily to the practical nature of all sessions, the provision of multiple opportunities for collaborative work, and the insightful leadership of the program coordinator, who kept participants focused on achieving high-quality implementation of Ramp-Up elements.

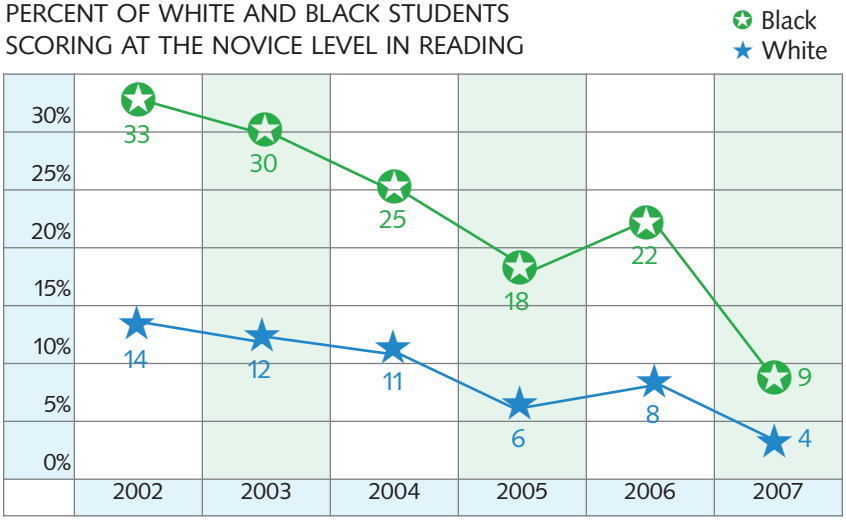
Evidence gathered at Level 2 on participants' learning confirmed expected results. Teachers who implemented the Ramp-Up Program during the pilot exercise and attended the refresher institute showed little difference in their before and after training measures. Recall, however, that these were experienced veterans of the program. On the other hand, teachers new to the program who attended the three-day induction summer institute experienced a significant increase in their knowledge of critical program elements and implementation procedures.

In analyzing Level 3 data on organization support and change, our interest was not only in assessing support but also in differences in perceptions of support between teachers and school administrators. Overall, both teachers and administrators indicated high levels of agreement (more than 90%) in professional development support, program implementation support, and other forms of organizational support and change. Comparative analyses showed, however, that teachers were less positive than administrators in their ratings of professional development planning, the quality of district follow-up support, and receiving appropriate resources when needed. These areas will be specifically targeted in planning program revisions.

The observations of teachers at Level 4 on participants' use of new knowledge and skills showed a significant gain in the quality of program implementation from the fall to spring observations. Apparently, the feedback offered to teachers following the fall observations, in conjunction with follow-up professional development support, helped teachers implement critical program elements with much greater fidelity. Observation results also revealed, however, that teachers need more help and guidance implementing some elements than others. In the area of rituals and routines, for example, teachers made the greatest gains between fall and spring in having students enter the classroom according to expectations and adhering to the course schedule. This showed us that these areas need special attention in considering revisions of both the summer institute and refresher institute.

High school reading novice minority gap (2002-07)

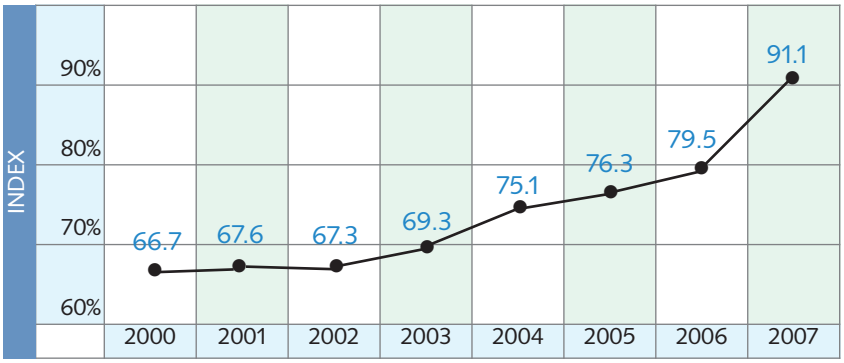
PERCENT OF WHITE AND BLACK STUDENTS SCORING AT THE NOVICE LEVEL IN READING



Source: Kentucky Department of Education.

High school reading index (2000-07)

TREND IN THE HIGH SCHOOL ACADEMIC INDEX IN READING



Source: Kentucky Department of Education.

The evidence gathered at Level 5 regarding student learning outcomes was analyzed in several ways. First, we compared achievement results from the high- versus low-implementation groups. Next, we expanded the comparison by considering results from matched comparison groups of students from each participating school. Finally, we analyzed the overall impact of the program on the district's high school system.

To compare high- versus low-implementation teachers, we split the group of participating teachers in half, with 20 teachers in each group, based on results from the spring observation rubric. Using classroom as the unit of analysis, we compared students' scores on the Predictive Assessment Series (PAS), a ThinkLink (2007) benchmark test that is administered at the beginning of the school year. We did this to determine whether or not the degree of implementation might be linked to the characteristics of the students involved. Analyses showed that there were no significant differences between the students in high- versus low-implementation classrooms in their entry-level skills. Because we used the PAS scores, along with measures of race and participation in free or reduced lunch benefits programs to match Ramp-Up classrooms with the comparison control classrooms, no differences were evident between these groups of classrooms as well.

Our primary measure of student learning was KCCT reading scores. This assessment consists of 24 multiple-choice items and six open-response items. Our analyses showed statistically significant differences between the scores of students in the high- versus low-implementation classrooms and also between the high-implementation group and the matched control group. Differences between the low-implementation group and the matched control group were not statistically significant. In other words, students in classrooms where Ramp-Up was implemented well made far greater gains in their reading scores than students in classrooms where Ramp-Up was implemented less well and students in matched control classrooms.

We also explored differences over time by comparing aggregated data on academic achievement in reading for all high schools in the district from several years prior to Ramp-Up implementation to the most recent year of assessment data. In Kentucky, student performance on statewide assessments is classified at one of four levels: novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished. The chart on p. 36 shows the percent reduction in students scoring at the lowest novice level in reading from 2000 to 2007. While a slow but steady decline in the percent of students scoring at this lowest level was evident each year, the biggest reduction by far occurred following implementation of the Ramp-Up Program. The chart at left top displays these same data broken down by race. This illustrates that not only did the percent of students scoring at this lowest level decline dramatically after implementation of the Ramp-Up Program, but the gap between the performance of white and black students was significantly reduced.

Findings helped us determine where changes would likely be needed to improve the program's effectiveness.

Finally, the lower chart on p. 37

shows the change in the district high school Reading Academic Index from 2000 to 2007. Scores on this index range from 0 to 100 and provide a major component of the accountability metric for Kentucky schools. Again, while high schools in the district were making slow but steady progress each year, the level of progress rose rapidly following implementation of the Ramp-Up Program. These figures represent data from all high school students, not just those included in Ramp-Up classrooms. Hence, they do not show the full extent of the improvements that might be attributable to the Ramp-Up Program. Data such as these have prompted board members and program funders to offer additional funding so that we might continue and expand all of the professional development activities associated with Ramp-Up Program implementation.

DISCUSSION

Our evaluation of the Ramp-Up Program and its associated professional development has its limitations. For the most part, teachers chose to participate in this initiative based on their interest in improving high school students' English and language arts skills. This self-selecting process may have made participating teachers more motivated than their teaching colleagues and, hence, our results may be applicable only to comparably motivated teachers. Still, the comparisons we made between classrooms with high and low levels of implementation, as well as to matched control classrooms, provide fairly strong evidence on the effectiveness of the program and the professional development involved in its implementation.

Linking professional development to improvements in student learning outcomes remains a challenge for educators at all levels. We believe that this challenge must be addressed.

Linking professional development to improvements in student learning outcomes remains a challenge for educators at all levels. We believe, however, that this challenge must be addressed (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). At a time when educators are being pressured by increased demands for accountability, it is imperative that we be able to demonstrate an associative link, if not a causal link, between professional development and improvements in trusted measures of student learning. We also must have the courage to abandon activities and restructure or redefine efforts when such a link cannot be verified. Systematic evaluations of professional development provide the first step in establishing this link. Such evaluations do not require large amounts of time or effort. What they require is thoughtful planning.

Following the backward planning process outlined by Guskey (2001a & b) helped us to address most of the issues involved in our evaluation before beginning the program. In addition, the evidence we gathered at each of the five evaluation levels (Guskey, 2000) helped us improve the program while in operation and provided us with the information we needed to demonstrate its effectiveness to different stakeholders. As result of our evaluation, the district is now providing more ongoing, job-embedded professional development to teachers who continue to score low on their implementation of Ramp-Up elements (Level 4). We also have made specific improvements in the summer institute, the refresher institute, and the follow-up sessions. Through these more tailored professional development opportunities, we hope to better meet teachers' unique instructional needs while enhancing their skills in working with a diverse population of struggling readers.

Effective professional development cannot be a one-size-fits-all activity with little follow-up support (Robb, 2000). Instead, it must be a purposeful, professionally embedded endeavor that offers educators the ongoing guidance and support they need to adapt research-based strategies to the unique context of their classrooms and the students with whom they work. If professional development leaders begin planning with clear ideas about what they want to accomplish in terms of learning and learners, and work backward from there, not only will planning be more purposeful, but evaluation efforts will be easier, more focused, more informative, and much more meaningful.

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