

Building capacity in low-performing readers Results of two months of Reading Plus® practice

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In this report, we describe the progress of students with extreme reading deficits over the first two months of a web-based reading intervention, *Reading Plus*.

Reading Plus is typically utilized as an instructional solution for developing and challenged readers. In alignment with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), *Reading Plus* offers a wide range of carefully leveled narrative and informational texts that engage students, encourage students to read with purpose and understanding, and develop skills needed to achieve year-end expectations as outlined in the CCSS. Adaptive scaffolds carefully address individual student needs and facilitate each student's development of comprehension-based silent reading efficiency and independent silent reading proficiency.

Who are the students?

During the first two months of the 2013-14 school year, approximately 350,000 students completed *InSight*TM, the *Reading Plus* entry assessment. First graders and college students also completed the assessment, but for the purpose of this study our interest lies with students from grades 2 through 12, which is the focus of the CCSS. Inexperienced and struggling readers are well-represented among those engaging in *Reading Plus* practice in most schools, so it is not surprising that the large majority of students were assessed by *InSight* to have reading proficiency levels below their grade level. Of the entire group of 350,000 students, 61% were deemed "Ready" for the entire *Reading Plus* program, including the efficiency development activities that aim to increase students' comprehension-based reading rates at the same time as bolstering comprehension and vocabulary.

While the majority of students are ready for efficiency development, 25% are deemed "Borderline" and 14% are viewed as "Not Ready." These are students with low comprehension, and low silent reading rates and/or vocabulary. The percentage of students who were Not Ready or Borderline for efficiency development was highest for the 2nd-3rd grade band (almost 40% Not Ready, 40% Borderline). The percentage decreased through higher grades (11th-CCR grade band: 5% Not Ready, 10% Borderline).

What is this study's purpose?

Borderline and Not Ready students may be unprepared for the efficiency development *Reading Plus* provides, but the program offers much more than efficiency training. *Reading Plus* includes a wealth of texts that offer these challenged readers the critical practice they need to improve comprehension, vocabulary, and stamina.

This study looks at how Ready, Borderline, and Not Ready students performed in *Reading Plus* during the first two months of the school year. We were especially interested in how the Borderline and Not Ready groups of students progressed when they had the opportunity to be exposed to substantial amounts of text on a

consistent basis. We tracked the progress of students who completed at least 40 *SeeReader* (reading practice) lessons over two months.

After 40 lessons, how are the students doing?

Comprehension is the goal of reading, so we will use this as our point of departure. The information on the three groups' gains appears in Table 1. In *Reading Plus*, the benchmark for comprehension is 80% or higher.

The gains of the Not Ready students, after 40 lessons, each approximately 15 minutes long (*i.e.*, a total of approximately 10 hours of reading practice), are quite phenomenal: These students have gained an average of 18% in their comprehension. Students have gone from marginally understanding to solidly comprehending texts. Both Borderline and Ready students increased their comprehension averages to meet the 80% benchmark. The magnitude of the information represented in the 31-40 lessons column comes into perspective when the size of the sample (30,310 students) and the number of lessons (10) are considered. To attain the average represented in that column, 30,310 students comprehended at around 80% over the course of 303,100 lessons. Both the level and consistency of these comprehension performances—whatever the initial status of students in relation to efficiency—represent remarkable improvements in reading capacity.

Table 1.

Comprehension means for students who were identified as Not Ready, Borderline, and Ready for efficiency development by *InSight* and completed 40+ lessons over the first two months of *Reading Plus* use

	Grade Band	Number of Students	Average Comprehension (%)		Average Efficiency and Capacity Gains	
			Startup Lessons*	31-40 Lessons**	Rate Gain*** (wpm)	Grade-Level Gain
Not Ready	2-3	533	57.8	79.9	6	.6
	4-5	410	61.8	78.9	9	.7
	6-8	426	61.2	76.3	9	.7
	9-10	172	62.5	78.4	14	.9
	11-CCR	80	70.3	80.8	16	1.3
	All	1621	60.8	78.6	9	.7
Borderline	2-3	1214	68.5	81.6	21	.9
	4-5	2509	72.2	81.3	28	1.0
	6-8	2167	71.2	80.5	34	1.1
	9-10	810	72.7	80.9	34	1.2
	11-CCR	287	75.0	81.2	35	1.3
	All	6987	71.4	81.0	30	1.0
Ready	2-3	931	74.8	82.5	30	1.1
	4-5	4570	77.3	82.2	36	1.4
	6-8	7577	77.3	81.6	44	1.5
	9-10	5359	78.2	81.6	48	1.9
	11-CCR	3265	80.5	82.2	55	2.2
	All	21,702	77.9	81.9	44	1.7

*Comprehension percent average for first four lessons students completed.

**Comprehension percent average for most current set of 10 lessons students completed.

***Comprehension-Based Silent Reading Rate (CBSRR) in words per minute (wpm).

Reading rate gains—students who enter *Reading Plus* with a higher level of reading capacity immediately focus on efficiency development. But lower-performing students first establish foundational independent reading capacity and stamina before moving on to the program's efficiency development. In fact, approximately 39% of the students who took the *InSight* assessment at the start of the school year needed to focus initially on comprehension and stamina development. *Reading Plus* determines rate within the context of an authentic reading experience, ensuring that students comprehend text as rates are measured. This is described as the comprehension-based silent reading rate (CBSRR). Changes in the comprehension-based rate of reading are hard to affect, especially as students move through the grades.¹ Therefore, the reading rate gains of all three groups are noteworthy. While they are impressive for the Borderline and Ready students, they are also notable for the Not Ready students, whose initial instructional focus was comprehension and stamina development since they were not ready for efficiency development.

Grade-level gains—the increases in students' capacity to read complex text—are central to successful reading. *Reading Plus* levels align with CCSS recommendations for text complexity, using rigorous standards for determining students' placement into levels and movement to increasingly challenging levels. Students are assigned to a level based on their *InSight* initial performance. Movement to a higher level requires students to satisfy several criteria, the primary of which is to complete a set number of lessons with 80% or higher comprehension.

Even with rigorous criteria, each group increased capacity to efficiently read more complex text. These gains were made in a short period of time (approximately 10 hours, or 1% of the 1,000 hours students will spend in school this year). We are not suggesting that students spend all of their time in a single program over the entire school year. A target of 50-60 hours of students' time over a school year in *Reading Plus* is likely reasonable. Nor are we suggesting that the initial spurt of growth will be consistent over this 50-60 hour period. However, consistent use of *Reading Plus* means students are moving up the staircase of text complexity—including students such as those in the Grade 9-10 grade band who have spent almost 10,000 hours in school but were still floundering at early reading levels.

What can we conclude?

The results of the first two months of *Reading Plus* practice are exceptionally encouraging. These data indicate that even the most severely struggling students are benefitting from *Reading Plus* practice. For severely challenged readers facing Common Core demands, this first report indicates that it may be possible to narrow substantially the gap between where students are and where they are expected to be (according to the Common Core) with consistent and well-designed opportunities to read.

The critical question, of course, is whether these improvements can be sustained over a school year—and even a school career. Stay tuned. We will continue to provide reports throughout this academic year.

¹ Wexler, J., Vaughn, S., Edmonds, M., & Reutebuch, C.K. (2008). A synthesis of fluency interventions for secondary struggling readers. *Reading and Writing, 21*, 317-347.