

RESEARCH BRIEF – MARCH 2014

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# An Evaluation of the Houston Independent School District's Secondary Reading Initiative: First Year Student Effects

The Houston Independent School District's (HISD) Secondary Reading Initiative (SRI) was first implemented in the 2012-13 school year and is currently in operation (as of the 2013-14 school year). The primary objective of SRI for the 2012-13 school year was to “target students in the sixth and ninth grade who are reading below the 50th percentile as measured by the Stanford Achievement Test” (HISD, 2012). HISD schools were required to offer a reading course geared towards students meeting a set criteria based on scores on the 2011-12 Stanford reading standardized assessment. Students deemed eligible for SRI were required to take this specialized reading course in addition to their other, required language arts courses.

HISD has contracted with the Neuhaus Education Center, a non-profit educational foundation, to accomplish the goal of increasing achievement for students struggling with reading (Neuhaus, n.d.). Neuhaus aims to help HISD accomplish this goal by training teachers with extensive evidence-based professional development. Teachers were provided with financial incentives to participate in Neuhaus-provided SRI training. The first component awards teachers a stipend of \$3,000 for completing all of the required professional development workshops. The second component provides an additional incentive of up to \$7,000 based on SRI-eligible students' performances on the 2012-13 STAAR reading assessment.



In order to evaluate the effectiveness of receiving SRI, two approaches were used to compare differences in standardized assessment reading gains for students both barely eligible and ineligible for SRI. The first approach examines the SRI impact with an intent to treat (ITT) analysis. SRI eligible students are considered part of the treatment group only if they met the necessary conditions for SRI eligibility. The second approach is a localized average treatment effect (LATE) that attempts to provide a better sense of the effect that the SRI intervention has on eligible students identified as receiving the treatment. There are 18,288 sixth and ninth grade students from 101 included in these analyses.

### **Research Questions**

1. Did students benefit from the Secondary Reading Initiative intervention?
2. What were the effects for students who received instruction from trained teachers?
3. Were there significant effects at the second intervention cutoff?
4. Were ineligible students from particular subgroups disproportionately assigned to the intervention?
5. What did students sacrifice in exchange for Secondary Reading Initiative courses?

### **Key Findings**

- On average, students who were marginally eligible for the Secondary Reading Initiative intervention show no significant reading test score gains relative to those students who were marginally ineligible.

- Eligible students who were enrolled in a remediation course with a teacher who completed the professional development requirements did not make significant reading gains relative to those students who were marginally ineligible for the intervention.

- Students who scored at or just below the 25th percentile (and therefore eligible for the second cut remediation) did not make gains that were significantly different from students scoring just above this eligibility threshold.

- There were generally no significant effects for student subgroups across these analyses.

- Low socioeconomic status and at risk students who were ineligible for the intervention (i.e. scoring above the 50th percentile) were disproportionately assigned to the remediation courses.

- Students who were enrolled in a reading remediation course had significantly less time and fewer opportunities to participate in the arts and physical education courses.

### **Suggestions**

- Collect fidelity measures to assess effectiveness of program implementation.

- Restructure financial incentives to more effectively reward teachers. Specifically, make teachers' test gain rewards based more on continuous rather than discrete performance measures.

- Further consider the potential consequences of student course tradeoffs.

Unfortunately, SRI does not appear to have produced positive effects in its first year. Null results in the first year of a new program, however, are fairly common. School and district administrators often have to make many adjustments in response to unforeseen implementation challenges. Some of these changes are already reflected in some of the SRI policy amendments that have been made in the second year. HISD has decreased the SRI eligibility criteria to the 40th percentile on reading. Students at this level might have a more positive response to the intervention than students closer to the 50th percentile. Also, reducing the number of students eligible for remediation courses could decrease SRI class sizes and allow teachers to better target students within a narrower range of achievement levels. However, compliance and fidelity concerns still have the potential to undermine effectiveness. ■



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