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Fla. Pushes Longer Day, More Reading in Some Schools

By **Catherine Gewertz**

Two years ago, Florida took a step no other state has taken to improve students' reading skills: It required its 100 lowest-performing elementary schools to add an extra hour to their school day and to use that time for reading instruction. Early results suggest the new initiative may be paying off.

After only a year with the extra hour, three-quarters of the schools saw improved reading scores on the state's standardized test, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, or FCAT. Seventy of the schools earned their way off the lowest-performing list altogether. "That extra time for reading instruction was really important for us," said Kathy Shuler, who oversees the school transformation office in Orlando's Orange County district, where all seven schools in the extra-hour reading program's first year, 2012-13, improved their reading scores and are no longer on the list.

The Florida program arose from **a 2012 law** mandating the additional hour each day for "intensive reading instruction." The law's author, Republican state Sen. David Simmons, had taken note of a pilot program for four schools in 2007-08. Three boosted their school grades from D's or F's to C's in Florida's accountability ratings, and one vaulted to an A. He wanted to see more schools do what they had done.

"Done right, the benefits of this program are extensive and in some cases dramatic," Sen. Simmons said.

Despite being a state mandate, the program has won over some school leaders and teachers. In fact, 30 schools that were required to participate in 2012-13 opted to keep it up this school year even though they'd gotten off the watch list.



A student at Pine Villa Elementary School underlines words during a "reading intervention" block.

—Josh Ritchie for Education Week

Sen. Simmons said he hopes to persuade the legislature to expand the program, which does not come with any additional state aid, to all of Florida's low-performing schools.

A legislative study of the extra-hour program's first year, presented to state lawmakers this month, found that of the 73 schools whose FCAT scores improved, 17 saw jumps of more than 10 percentage points, and 35 saw gains of 5 percentage points to 10 percentage points. Growth was particularly strong among the students scoring at level 1 or 2 on the five-level test.

A Mix of Results

And yet, some of the study's results were paradoxical. Students at only 20 of the participating schools performed better than those at demographically similar schools that did not add an hour for reading. Interviews with principals as part of the study indicated that while most provided training to teachers in the new reading program, and about half gave them additional planning time, neither of those measures correlated with better outcomes. Only 22 of the 100 schools improved their A-F accountability grades, perhaps in part because those grades are based on a host of indicators other than reading. Laurie Lee, the deputy director of the state education department's Just Read, Florida! office, said several aspects of the extra-hour initiative are challenging. One is that schools have to scramble to set up reading interventions, since they don't learn until July that they are

on the list. The annual changes in the list are also difficult, she said, since schools never know if they should plan more than a year out for the extra programming, or if they can count on having the extra instructional coaches that come with being on the list.

Nevertheless, the program produced such strong results in its first year that state officials see it as an important part of their strategy.

More Time for Reading

In 2012, Florida enacted legislation requiring its 100 lowest-performing elementary schools to extend their day by one hour and use the time for reading instruction. A legislative study of the program's first year, 2012-13, finds that most schools improved their state reading scores.

Test Results

- **73** of the 100 schools increased the percentage of students scoring at grade level
- **61** raised the median reading level of 4th grade students who had been reading below grade level
- **62** raised the median reading level of 5th grade students who had been reading below grade level

School Grades

- **22** schools improved their school grade (Florida's A-F grades are based on reading, writing, math, and science scores, and on the growth of scores in reading and math)

School Status

- **70** of the schools improved their FCAT reading score sufficiently enough to be removed from the 2013-14 list of 100 lowest-performing elementary schools
- **30** of the schools are now in their second year of the program because they are still among the 100 lowest-performing schools for 2013-14

Source: Office of Sen. David Simmons of Florida

"Lots of things happen in school in the course of the day and the year," said Ms. Lee. "Did [the extra hour] contribute to their improvement? I would certainly think it did, just having that focus on reading, the intensity during that additional hour."

Florida's extended-time program is unique in its focus on reading.

Massachusetts' widely known "2020" program encourages struggling schools to apply for grants to extend their day, though not specifically for reading. Districts, too, such as Chicago, have added time to the school day in a bid to boost achievement, but none exclusively targets reading, according to the Education Commission of the States, a Denver-based group that analyzes state policy.

Also, Florida's law was the first to clearly say students in the extra-hour reading program must be assigned to teachers "who are effective in teaching reading," said Kathy Christie, who oversees the ECS database.

Local Decisions

Florida districts had a lot of leeway in deciding how to handle the extra hour. And while their plans had to be approved by the state education agency, some still allowed participating schools to shape the additional instructional time as they saw fit.

Springfield Elementary was the only school in the Bay County district on the lowest-performing list in 2012-13, and district officials let Principal Harriet Taylor and her staff design their program. They chose to tack the hour onto each morning's 90-minute reading block, already required by Florida law, rather than attach it to the end of the day, when most children are tired, Ms. Taylor said.

Teachers had been using a textbook-based literacy program and concluded that it didn't address students' weak foundational skills, she said. They switched to a direct-instruction approach, using McGraw-Hill's SRA program to pinpoint children's needs and move them up, level by level, as they showed mastery. Some of the reading block was devoted to teaching students at their grade level, which was a stretch for many. Part of the time, students were regrouped with different teachers according to skill level, Ms. Taylor said.

Springfield also adopted an "all hands on deck" approach to the extended reading block, providing training in the SRA program to all 35 classroom teachers and 80 paraprofessionals in the building. Everyone worked in small-group instruction with children.

The 470-student school is not on the lowest-performing list this year, and it raised its grade from D to C. But it's keeping the program.

"If we don't keep it in place, we'll fall right back down to where we were, and I don't want that to happen," she said.

Of all the indicators of the program's success, Ms. Taylor's favorite is one that took shape after last spring's FCAT. As students lined up to go home that day, child after child reported that the test was easier than the year before. She finally asked one child why. "And he said, 'Because I could read it, Mrs. Taylor. I could read the questions this year,' " the principal recalled.

Linda Pitts, the instructional specialist in the 26,000-student district in Florida's Panhandle, said a different school is on the list this year and is using the SRA program, but it chose to put the extra hour at the end of the day.

Many districts, however, took a more centralized approach to the added hour. Palm Beach County was one of those, and it cut its list of lowest-performing schools from 16 in 2012 to five in 2013.

Those schools kept up with their core, standards-based instruction during the 90-minute block, which uses whole-group and small-group instruction and shared and independent readings. During the new extra hour, it used Heinemann's Leveled Literacy Intervention, explicitly teaching comprehension and reading strategies, along with vocabulary and word-attack skills, in groups of three students, said Debbie Battles, the director of elementary curriculum in the 187,000-student Palm Beach district.

All principals and teachers at the 16 listed schools attended six full days of training in the program, and all teachers participated in the 60-minute reading block, said Cheryl Alligood, Palm Beach's chief academic officer. Additionally, principals from all 16 schools met monthly for networking and support. The district chose to keep the extra hour in place this year at all 16 schools, even though it was no longer required in any but one.

"I think what made it work so well for us was the investment we put into doing it right, with the appropriate training," she said.

Union Concerns

The Palm Beach County Classroom Teachers Association, like many

local unions, negotiated an agreement with the district that paid teachers for the extra hour and gave them the right to transfer if they didn't wish to extend their day. At first, union leaders were skeptical of the added time, but they came to see it differently.

"We surveyed our members [after the first year] and found that for the most part, people liked it and said they'd do it again," said Lynn Cavall, the executive director of the 12,000-member union. "They thought it was helpful for the kids, and teachers were there because they wanted to be there."

In Orange County, the key to the extra hour was an intent focus on differentiating instruction according to each child's needs, said Ms. Shuler. That meant making sure that children scoring high on the FCAT had reading enrichment while lower-scoring children worked on foundational skills. The 187,000-student district's approach to the lower performers was "highly scripted," she said, with an interactive read-aloud for the first five to seven minutes of the hour, followed by teachers meeting with three small groups, by skill level, for 15 to 18 minutes each.

The Miami-Dade County district employs a heavily centralized approach to the added hour, too, in part because it makes the program easier to monitor across 22 schools, said Charmyn Kirton, who oversees elementary curriculum in the district's "transformation" schools. The 348,000-student district had 11 schools on the watch list last year. It attributes the rise in part to changes in FCAT cutoff scores and the inclusion of more special education and English-learner students in its accountability system. Ms. Kirton said she's hoping that coaching support from the central office will improve results this year. Some schools have struggled to make an impact with the extra hour. Miami-Dade's Pine Villa Elementary is one of them. Its FCAT scores barely budged after a year, and its school grade slipped from D to F. But far more of its lowest-scoring students made reading gains of one year or more than had done so before the extra hour.

Principal Vanessa de la Pena said that use of the Saxon Phonics program helps teachers pinpoint each child's reading level and move them up from there. But her teachers concluded after one year that it wasn't well-rounded enough. Students needed work in comprehension, fluency, and oral language as well.

This school year, in consultation with the district, Pine Villa added another program to address those needs. While lower-scoring children work with those foundational programs, Ms. de la Pena said, more-able readers are pulled out with specialists to read novels and work in literature circles.

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