

SCALING UP THE SUCCESS FOR ALL MODEL OF SCHOOL REFORM

**Final Report from the
Investing in Innovation
(i3) Evaluation**

Executive Summary

mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

Janet Quint
Pei Zhu
Rekha Balu
Shelley Rappaport
Micah DeLaurentis

September 2015

Executive Summary

Scaling Up the Success for All Model of School Reform

Final Report from the Investing in Innovation (i3) Evaluation

**Janet Quint
Pei Zhu
Rekha Balu
Shelley Rappaport
Micah DeLaurentis**

with

**Emma Alterman
Colin Bottles
Emily Pramik**

September 2015



Funding for this report came from the U.S. Department of Education under its Investing in Innovation (i3) initiative. The i3 grant called for the Success for All Foundation to scale up its elementary school whole-school reform initiative and for MDRC to conduct an independent evaluation of the implementation and impacts of that expansion.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following funders that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JBP Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Sandler Foundation, and The Starr Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our website: www.mdrc.org.

Copyright © 2015 by MDRC®. All rights reserved.

Overview

Success for All (SFA) is one of the best-known school reform initiatives. Combining a challenging reading program, whole-school reform elements, and an emphasis on continuous improvement, it seeks to ensure that every child learns to read well in the elementary grades. In 2010, the Success for All Foundation (SFAF) received a scale-up grant under the U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) program. This third and final report from the independent evaluation of the i3 scale-up examines the program's implementation and impacts over three years, its incremental cost, and the scale-up process itself. Thirty-seven evaluation schools in five school districts were randomly assigned either to a program group of 19 schools that received SFA or to a control group of 18 schools that used alternative reading programs. This design supports causal impact findings for the average school assigned to SFA. Overall, the evaluation led to several key findings:

- Although SFA was implemented with adequate fidelity at the great majority of schools that adopted it, resource constraints prevented some schools from putting in place some of its key features, including a full-time facilitator and SFA's computerized tutoring program.
- Program group and control group schools were different in some respects (for example, SFA schools were unique in placing students in cross-grade ability groups for reading, and SFA teachers made greater use of cooperative learning) but similar in others.
- SFA is an effective vehicle for teaching phonics. In the average SFA school, the program registered a notable, statistically significant impact on a measure of phonics skills for second-graders who had been in SFA for all three years, compared with their control group counterparts. Students in the average SFA school did not outperform their counterparts in the average control group school on tests of reading fluency or comprehension.
- For a subgroup of special concern to policymakers and practitioners — students entering school with low preliteracy skills — SFA appears to be especially effective. Second-graders in the average SFA school who had started kindergarten in the bottom half of the sample in terms of their knowledge of the alphabet and their ability to sound out words registered significantly higher scores on measures of phonics skills, word recognition, and reading fluency than similar students in control group schools. The impact on comprehension for this group was also positive but not statistically significant. The program did not significantly affect outcomes for the subgroup of students who started kindergarten in the top half of the sample in terms of phonetic skills.
- In a case study district, the direct expenditures for additional reading facilitator time, after-school tutoring, materials, and professional development were estimated to cost \$119 more per student per year in SFA schools than in control group schools. Including the extra time that SFA principals devoted to the program and that coaches and teachers spent in training, the extra cost of space for storing SFA materials, and other factors, program group schools spent about \$227 worth of resources per student per year more than control group schools.
- Through the fourth year of the i3 grant, SFA was put in place in 447 new schools and reached an estimated 276,000 students. These numbers fell below SFAF's ambitious goals but represent a notable achievement in a period of staff layoffs and other cutbacks in many schools and districts.

Preface

Low reading skills remain a pressing problem in the United States. With the emergence of more demanding academic expectations — as represented by the Common Core State Standards — students will need stronger reading skills to master more complex content. Despite more than a decade of concentrated effort to improve reading instruction, elementary student reading achievement scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (“The Nation’s Report Card”) have increased only modestly, signaling the need for continued improvement. The Success for All Foundation (SFAF) has been active in reading instruction for some three decades, building evidence of the effectiveness of its approach in improving the reading skills of elementary school students. Thus, it was not a surprise that the Success for All reading program was one of the initial recipients of a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) scale-up grant designed to provide support for the expansion of evidence-based programs. This report, the last in a series of three, completes MDRC’s evaluation of the SFA elementary reading program under i3.

SFAF works with schools to put in place a comprehensive approach to reading instruction. It involves a highly structured curriculum that covers the five key elements identified by the National Reading Panel (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension); a strong emphasis on cooperative learning; cross-grade grouping of students by reading skills; extensive use of assessment data to adjust groupings and instruction; and tutoring for students in need of additional help. SFA also includes schoolwide structures that address attendance, behavior, and parental involvement to support student learning. Full implementation of this comprehensive approach has required substantial effort on the part of school staff already facing the challenges of funding cuts resulting from the recession as well as the new demands of the Common Core standards. Thus, the scale-up of SFA under i3 was especially ambitious, but also timely in light of current efforts to encourage evidence-based funding decisions and the expansion of proven programs.

The report provides findings on all aspects of the SFA reading scale-up initiative: Was the program implemented with fidelity as it was scaled up? Did SFA produce a difference in reading instruction compared with instruction in business-as-usual schools in the study? Did schools implementing SFA have better student achievement than alternative reading programs, on average and for key subgroups of students? What were the extra costs of implementing SFA? And how did SFA fare in its efforts to increase the number of schools implementing the program in a time of severe economic constraints? The answers to these questions are highly relevant as policymakers strive to increase the use of evidence in decision-making.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

Acknowledgments

This third and final report of the Investing in Innovation (i3) scale-up evaluation of Success for All reflects the efforts of a great many people. As with the two previous reports, our first debt of gratitude is to the principals, SFA coordinators, research liaisons, and teachers at the schools that participated in this study; to staff members in the central offices of the five school districts who provided us with critical student records data as well as fiscal and staffing information; and to district coaches who took part in interviews. The assistance and cooperation of these individuals were vital for enabling the study to go forward and for providing the rich and detailed information on which this report is based.

At the Success for All Foundation, Nancy Madden, Sharon Fox, and Jill Hanson responded promptly and patiently to our many information requests. Nancy Madden and Robert Slavin provided useful critiques at each stage of the report drafting process.

Pamela Wells and her capable team at Decision Information Resources, Inc., produced the student assessment data that are at the heart of the impact study. MDRC staff members Jo Anna Hunter and Nicole Morris worked with DIR to ensure that these data were collected on schedule and with minimal disruption to school operations. Thomas J. Smith played an active role in field research, data collection, and coding.

Within MDRC, Seth Muzzy helped prepare the principal and teacher surveys and the instructional logs that constitute important data sources for the report. Shirley James, Zuleka Abakoyas, Donna George, and Carmen Troche keyed surveys and logs. Emma Alterman, Colin Bottles, Cammie Brown, Zachary Pinto, Emily Pramik, and Gary Reynolds played important roles in data collection, analysis, and the preparation of this report.

Fred Doolittle ensured that the team received both material and moral support at every juncture. He, along with Gordon Berlin, Howard Bloom, Charles Michalopoulos, Jean Grossman, Robert Ivry, and Leigh Parise, carefully reviewed earlier drafts of the report and made comments that improved the final product. Kelly Granito kept the project on task and on budget, and Gina Price provided general fiscal oversight. Mario Flecha was his usual unflappable self in handling a variety of administrative and other tasks. Christopher Boland provided advice on preparing exhibits, and Stephanie Cowell prepared the manuscript for publication.

Jennie Kaufman edited the report with great sensitivity, and John Hutchins proffered welcome assistance as report production drew to a close.

The Authors

Executive Summary

In 2013, almost one-third of fourth-grade students in the United States scored below the “basic” level in reading, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as “The Nation’s Report Card.”¹ They could not locate relevant information in a text, make simple inferences based on what they read, or identify details to support an interpretation or conclusion. Students performing at this level lack the skills needed to demonstrate solid academic performance or to master challenging subject matter.

Success for All (SFA), one of the best-known school reform models, aims to improve the reading skills of all children but is especially directed at schools that serve large numbers of students from low-income families. First implemented in 1987, SFA combines a challenging reading program, whole-school reform elements, and an emphasis on continuous improvement, with the goal of ensuring that every child learns to read well in the elementary grades. SFA includes several specific features:

- A kindergarten through grade 6 reading program that emphasizes phonics for beginning readers and comprehension for all students
- Instruction that is characterized by “scripted,” briskly paced lesson plans that make extensive use of cooperative learning in pairs and small groups
- Cross-grade ability grouping for reading, with many students leaving their homeroom to receive reading instruction from another teacher, and quarterly regrouping
- Frequent assessments of student learning
- Computerized small-group tutoring and individual tutoring for students who need additional assistance
- Staff committees (“Solutions Teams”) that address academic, behavior, and attendance issues and that promote parent and community involvement
- Schoolwide and classroom programs to develop social and conflict resolution skills

¹See National Assessment of Educational Progress, “Nation’s Report Card: 2013 Mathematics and Reading” (2013), http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013. The percentage of students performing below the basic level was 32 percent. NAEP is a congressionally authorized project of the National Center for Education Statistics within the Institute of Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education. NAEP tests have been conducted periodically in a number of subject areas since 1969.

- Initial and ongoing professional development for teachers and use of data to monitor progress and set goals

This is the third and final report from an independent evaluation of the scale-up demonstration of the SFA elementary school reading program. Both the demonstration and the evaluation have been funded under the U.S. Department of Education’s Investing in Innovation (i3) competition. Conducted by MDRC — a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization — the evaluation examines SFA’s implementation and impacts in five school districts over a three-year period (the 2011-2012 school year through the 2013-2014 school year). It also includes an analysis of program costs. Finally, it considers the scale-up process itself — the methods employed and the extent to which the Success for All Foundation (SFAF), the organization that developed and provides technical assistance to schools operating the program, achieved its scale-up goals.

Previous evaluations, both experimental and quasi-experimental, showed that students in SFA schools performed better on standardized tests than students receiving other reading programs. The most salient of these evaluations was a three-year randomized experiment involving 35 schools serving low-income families. In that study, schools were randomly assigned to use Success for All either in kindergarten through grade 2 (K-2) or grades 3 through 5, with the schools that received the program in the later grades serving as a control group for the K-2 schools.² Children in the K-2 schools scored significantly higher than their counterparts in the 3-5 schools on the main outcomes measured — three tests that assessed children’s phonetic skills and comprehension. In other large-scale studies, results for students in SFA schools outstripped those for students in matched comparison schools.³ The strength of this evidence was critical to the selection of the Success for All Foundation as one of only four recipients of five-year scale-up grants awarded in 2010 in the initial i3 funding competition.

The Evaluation Design

The i3 evaluation of SFA employs an experimental design, in which 37 schools in five school districts that participated in the scale-up effort were assigned at random to a program group or to a control group. The 19 program group schools received SFA in all grades. The 18 control group schools did not get the intervention and, instead, either continued with the same reading

²See Geoffrey D. Borman, Robert E. Slavin, Alan C. K. Cheung, Anne M. Chamberlain, Nancy A. Madden, and Bette Chambers, “Final Reading Outcomes of the National Randomized Field Trial of Success for All,” *American Educational Research Journal* 44, no. 3 (2007): 701-731.

³See, for example, Brian Rowan, Richard Correnti, Robert J. Miller, and Eric M. Camburn, *School Improvement by Design: Lessons from a Study of Comprehensive School Reform Programs* (Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2009).

program that they had used previously or, in the case of some schools, adopted a new one. This design supports causal impact findings for the average school assigned to SFA.

Context for the Evaluation

It is useful to consider the economic and instructional contexts in which the SFA scale-up demonstration has unfolded. These contexts provide a framework through which to view the participating schools' ability to implement the full program model and SFAF's ability to meet its ambitious expansion goals. They also help to define the "counterfactual" — what happens in the absence of the program. Only to the extent that SFA differs from the counterfactual is the program likely to produce impacts. Two trends are worth noting:

- **The effects of the Great Recession and its aftermath.** At the point that SFAF was recruiting schools for the i3 scale-up, many schools and districts were trying to restore positions and services that had been cut as a result of the recession. Furthermore, principals felt that they had less discretion in spending their schools' allocations than had been the case in the past. These circumstances added a new dimension to the challenges already associated with selecting and implementing a new and demanding reading program in high-poverty schools.
- **Heightened focus on reading instruction.** Over the period since SFA was first developed in 1987, reading instruction in the United States has changed markedly. For example, the influence of the National Reading Panel report of 2000, the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001 (and, as a result, the creation of the Reading First program and the advent of high-stakes testing for grades 3 through 8), the rise of Response to Intervention reading support strategies, and the introduction of the Common Core standards have all contributed to an increased emphasis on phonics and additional interventions for struggling readers. These developments have had the effect of narrowing the differences between schools adopting SFA and schools using other reading programs and have made it harder than it used to be for SFA to "beat the competition."

Findings

Implementation

While Success for All was implemented with adequate fidelity at the large majority of schools that adopted it, resource constraints prevented some schools from putting in place some

of the program’s key features, including a full-time program facilitator and SFA’s own computerized tutoring for students in need of instruction beyond the classroom. Reading instruction in program group schools (or “SFA schools”) and control group schools was markedly different in some respects: Placing students by ability level in reading groups that crossed grade levels was unique to the program group schools, and program group teachers used cooperative learning as an instructional method more frequently than their counterparts in the control group schools. In other respects, the two groups of schools did not differ greatly. Despite some implementation challenges, 93 percent of the principals and 70 percent of the teachers in SFA schools who responded to surveys agreed that the SFA program benefited their schools.

Effects on Phonics

The evidence indicates that SFA is an effective vehicle for teaching phonics. In the average SFA school, the program registered a positive and statistically significant third-year impact on a strong measure of phonetic abilities (one that asks students to read phonetically regular nonsense words) for second-graders who had been in SFA classrooms for all three years, compared with their counterparts in control group schools — the groups that make up the “confirmatory sample” for the i3 study. This effect was also found in the previous two years of the demonstration, when these students were kindergartners and first-graders. In the second year, SFA also produced a positive and statistically significant effect on another measure of phonetic skills; in Year 3, this effect remained positive but was no longer statistically significant.

Effects on Comprehension

In Year 3 as in previous years, in the average SFA school, students did not outperform their counterparts in the average control group school on measures of reading fluency or comprehension. The comprehension finding is true for second-grade students in the confirmatory sample as well as for students in the upper elementary grades, for whom the analysis is considered exploratory. (The comprehension finding contrasts with that of the previously cited experimental study of SFA, which found a positive and statistically significant effect on comprehension for second-graders, as well as with several well-regarded quasi-experimental studies that found positive although not statistically significant effects.)

Effects on Students with Low Preliteracy Skills

Students who start school with low preliteracy skills are of special concern to policymakers and practitioners. An exploratory analysis indicates that the program had notable third-year impacts on a subgroup of second-graders who, at the start of kindergarten, scored in the bottom half of the sample in terms of their knowledge of the alphabet and their ability to sound out words. In the average SFA school, the program produced positive and statistically signifi-

cant impacts on measures of phonics skills, word recognition, and reading fluency for these students. The impact on comprehension was also positive, although it fell shy of meeting conventional standards of statistical significance. The program did not significantly affect these outcomes for the subgroup of students who started kindergarten in the top half of the sample in terms of phonetic skills.

Effects on Special Education and Grade Retention Rates

The program did not affect the rates at which students were held back to repeat a grade or at which they were identified for or declassified from special education.

Cost Analysis

The cost analysis makes use of the random assignment design within one case study district to assess the extent to which the district's SFA schools required additional resources to implement the program, relative to those used for alternative reading programs in the control group schools. In the study district, the direct expenditures for school-based reading facilitator time, after-school tutoring time, materials, and professional development were estimated to cost \$119 more per student per year in SFA schools than in control group schools. Adding to this the additional time that SFA principals devoted to the program, the additional time that coaches and teachers spent in training, the extra cost of devoting space to storing SFA curriculum materials, and other factors, program group schools spent about \$227 worth of resources per student per year more than control group schools to implement their respective reading programs.

Scale-Up

During the first four years of scale-up, SFA was put in place in 447 new schools with a total enrollment of some 218,000 students and, taking into account student turnover, is estimated to have reached some 276,000 students. While these numbers fell below the Success for All Foundation's ambitious initial goal of recruiting 760 schools within the first four years, they represent a notable achievement, especially in a period when many schools and districts were laying off staff and cutting back on programs.

Conclusion

The i3 scale-up has heightened the prominence of Success for All on the educational landscape. In an economic climate characterized by budgetary cutbacks that forced many school districts to cut staff and restrict program offerings, the Success for All Foundation projects that it will have reached almost 400,000 students in 540 schools by the end of the i3 grant. The scale-up findings show that, for a modest investment, SFA reliably improves the decoding skills of students in

kindergarten through second grade, and that it is especially beneficial for students who begin in the lower half in these skills.

Continuous improvement is a key element of the Success for All program. With a greater focus on improving comprehension and broader implementation of its tutoring component, Success for All might make an even bigger difference, and for more students, than it already does.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.