



# Exploring Third Grade Phonics Gains in i-Ready with STAAR using 95 Phonics Core Program

22-23 SCHOOL YEAR

Authors

**Rachel Schechter, Ph.D.**

**Rachel Gross, Ph.D.**

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**Learning Experience Design (LXD)  
Research & Consulting**  
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# UNDERSTANDING ESSA Evidence



## OVERVIEW

Evidence guidance under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) are designed to ensure that states, districts, and schools can identify programs, practices, products, and policies that work across various populations.

The Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA) requires education programs to provide evidence of effectiveness and impact in order to be federally supported. The Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology provides standards to assess the varying levels of strength of research for education products.

The categories for ESSA Evidence are: strong, moderate, and promising evidence of effectiveness, or demonstrates a rationale to be effective.

### This product meets the requirements for Level 3: Promising Evidence

- ✓ In correlational design, students who used the program are compared to normed referenced samples or other group averages for comparison.
- ✓ At least one study with the proper design and implementation with at least two teachers and 30 students showing statistically significant, positive findings.
- ✓ The study uses a form of a program that could be replicated.
- ★ A third-party research organization has reviewed the documentation for ESSA validation

# 95 PHONICS CORE PROGRAM<sup>®</sup>



## 2022/2023 RESULTS - GRADE 3 - IMPACT ON STAAR

### PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The 95 Phonics Core Program (PCP) brings classroom-ready, evidence-based phonics instruction to the literacy block. In 30 minutes a day, 95 PCP builds critical phonics skills through explicit instruction to develop strong readers, K-5. This study shows how explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction reduces intervention needs.

### SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION: Near San Antonio, Texas  
GRADE: 3  
SIZE: 410 Students  
DEMOGRAPHICS: 93% Hispanic | 71% Low Income | 79% ELL | 20% SPED

### STUDY DETAILS

The entire district used the 95 Phonics Core Program during the 2022-2023 school year.

#### PHONICS INSTRUCTION

#### CHANGES TO LITERACY TOOLKIT

**Tier 1 Phonics: 95 Phonics Core Program, training, and coaching.**

Classroom teachers used the 95 PCP end of unit tests to monitor student progress and target small group instruction based on student needs.

#### ASSESSMENTS

#### iReady<sup>®</sup>

iReady Reading Diagnostic Assessments were conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the 2022-2023 school year.

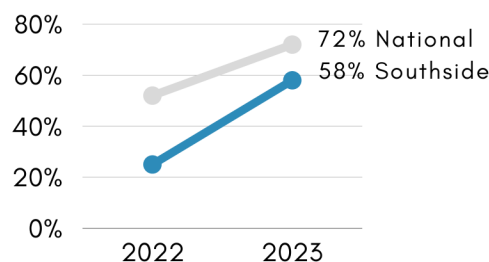
#### STAAR<sup>®</sup>

The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness were conducted at the end of the school year.

### KEY FINDINGS

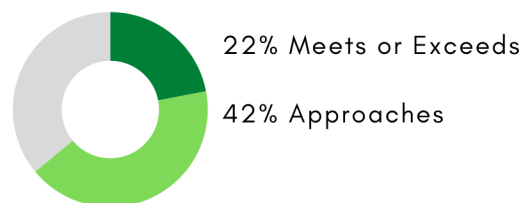
With 95 PCP, Southside improved phonics proficiency on iReady +13% over National trend, closing achievement gaps.

#### iReady Phonics, Percent On/Above

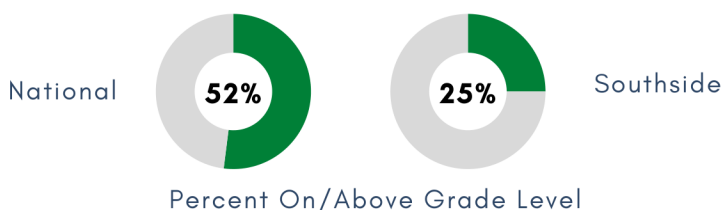


Students who advanced in Phonics from BOY to EOY were more likely to achieve Approaches Grade Level category (or better) on STAAR, compared to their peers who were remained below grade level in phonics.

**64% of students who were behind at BOY in Phonics filled gaps and were Approaches or better on STAAR**



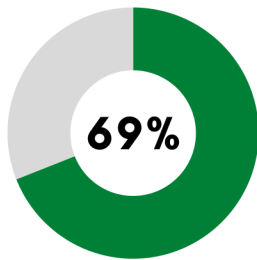
**95 PCP District started far behind in phonics in iReady at the start of the school year.**



Researchers examined STAAR state test results in conjunction with phonics improvement from BOY to EOY. The dramatic results provide additional evidence of the efficacy of the 95 PCP phonics intervention on global reading/language arts achievement, demonstrating a strong impact on reading/language arts composite scores. As phonics is not weighted heavily in the composite scores, these findings add to our understanding of how important phonics is for overall reading/language arts achievement.

## IMPACT OF PHONICS GROWTH ON STATE TEST RESULTS

### Students who improved at least one grade level in Phonics from BOY to EOY



Over two-thirds of students who were below grade level at BOY improved at least one grade level by EOY.

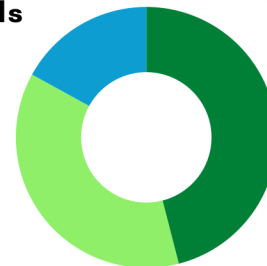
### Number of grade levels improved from BOY to EOY

Of the students who moved up at least one grade level, **the majority improved two or more grade levels.**

17% Improved 3 grade levels

46% Improved 1 grade level

37% Improved 2 grade levels



5x

Students who improved at least one grade level on Phonics were:

- **5x more likely** to achieve a STAAR performance level of **Approaches Grade Level or higher** ( $z = 4.10, p < .05$ )
- **4x more likely** to achieve a STAAR performance level of **Meets Grade Level or higher** ( $z = 2.34, p < .05$ )

10x

Achieving **Approaches Grade Level or higher** on Phonics was:

- **10x more likely** for students who improved 2 grade levels ( $z = 4.58, p < .05$ )
- **11x more likely** for students who improved 3 levels ( $z = 3.47, p < .05$ )

Achieving **Meets Grade Level or higher** on Phonics was:

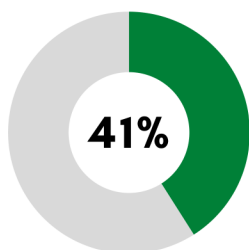
- **6x more likely** for students who 2 grade levels ( $z = 2.87, p < .05$ )
- **5x more likely** for students who improved 3 grade levels ( $z = 2.49, p < .05$ )

The majority of below-grade level students improved at least one grade level within one school year, and the majority of those improvements were students moving up to grade level. The results are especially exciting given that the sample primarily comprises ELL students and also has a relatively large SPED student group; it is highly encouraging that the full class intervention worked well for special populations.

### IMPACT OF PHONICS GROWTH ON STATE TEST RESULTS (CONTINUED)

#### Overall impact of the 95 PCP intervention

- Of the 69% of students who improved at least one grade level, 58% of those students rose to on/above grade level.
- Given the high proportion of students who were well below grade level at BOY, it is noteworthy that 54% improved two or more grade levels.



#### Students who advanced to on/above grade level in Phonics

41% of students who were below grade level at BOY rose to on/above grade level by EOY.

Students who rose from below grade level at BOY to on/above grade level at EOY were:

**20x**

- **20.63x more likely** to achieve **Approaches Grade Level or higher** ( $z = 5.95, p < .05$ )
- **8.29x more likely** to achieve **Meets Grade Level or higher** ( $z = 4.62, p < .05$ )

#### Analysis Notes

Likelihoods presented are from logistic regressions of STAAR EOY performance levels on phonics placement changes from BOY to EOY (via iReady scores). Log odds were exponentiated to odds ratios for interpretation, showing the odds of a given performance level for a given group compared to other groups.

While Overall Reading scores in iReady were highly correlated with STAAR EOY scores ( $r = .82$ ), iReady Phonics scores were only moderately correlated ( $r = .54$ ). Phonics skills are not directly assessed on the STAAR, but rather the application of those skills on more advanced reading skills are evaluated.



## Learning Experience Design (LXD) Research & Consulting

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### **Exploring Third Grade Phonics Gains in i-Ready with STAAR using 95 Phonics Core Program, 2022-2023**

Prepared by Dr. Rachel Gross & Dr. Rachel Schechter, [LXD Research](#)

#### **Executive Summary**

This study explored the impact of the 95 Phonics Core Program® (95 PCP) on student literacy achievement across third graders who started the school year at different ability levels. The primary focus of this report was to investigate the relationship between changes in phonics scores with the beginning and end-of-year i-Ready® assessments and outcomes on State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR®). To this end, i-Ready scores were collected from 4 elementary schools in the Southside Independent School District in San Antonio, Texas, during the 2022-2023 academic school year. Third graders from all schools were aggregated by beginning-of-year (BOY) placement level in terms of grade-level skills (kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third grade). Outcomes were expressed in terms of gains on scale scores and performance levels in STAAR. The analysis compared EOY performance levels for students who grew different amounts in their phonics skills during the school year. The analysis progressed through the following questions, each adding a piece to the overall picture.

#### **Research Questions**

This study complements a previously published study that only examined i-Ready scores during the 2022-2023 school year. This paper extends the research question to better understand how the phonics gains in i-Ready impacted STAAR scores and performance levels.

1. What was the relationship between i-Ready EOY phonics scores and overall reading scores with STAAR scores?
2. How do third graders' phonics score gains impact students' STAAR scores at the end of the year?
3. How did improving phonics proficiency on i-Ready impact the likelihood of Approaching or Meeting (or Exceeding) standards on STAAR?

## Analysis Method

A series of logistic regressions were performed with Approaches Grade Level or Meets Grade Level as the outcome variable and three variables derived from phonics placement changes from BOY to EOY as the explanatory variables: 1) whether students improved at least one grade level, 2) number of categories improved, and 3) whether the student increased to on/above grade level. Log odds were exponentiated to odds ratios for interpretation. Logistic regression results are presented alongside frequencies of grade level categorizations at BOY and EOY to further understand their relation with EOY STAAR scores.

## Results and Key Findings

The study results show that the 95 PCP effectively improves the phonics skills of students who start the year on or below grade level, subsequently improving overall reading skills by the end of the year, evidenced by higher STAAR scores. Almost half of the third graders (43%) started the year with kindergarten-level phonics skills (3+ years below). After one year, 63% advanced at least one grade level. Those phonics gains translated to overall reading score improvements and a higher likelihood of reaching Approaches Grade Level or better on STAAR.

<b>Phonics Growth</b>	<b>Approaches or Better (Meets or Better)</b>
Advanced 1+ Grade Levels	5 times more likely (4x)
Advanced 2 Grade Levels	10 times more likely (6x)
Advanced to On-Grade Level	21 times more likely (8x)

**Main Takeaway:** 95 Phonics Core Program (95 PCP) effectively improves third graders' phonics and overall reading skills through full class instruction, as evidenced by the decrease in the proportion of students scoring below grade level from fall to spring. The improvement of phonics scores was strongly associated with higher STAAR scores and an increased likelihood of meeting standards on STAAR.

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted student learning, particularly in the area of reading. According to the 2023 State of Student Learning report (Curriculum Associates, 2023), fewer students were on grade level in reading in Spring 2023 than historical averages. While the percentage of students on grade level in upper-elementary grades had almost returned to pre-pandemic levels, early-elementary grades continued to lag behind. In particular, 65% of 3rd-grade students were on grade level compared to a historical average of 72%. Though these trends are seen for all students, when examining the data by demographic information, differences in the proportion of students who met the grade level benchmark were significant, particularly for Latino students. For example, in schools serving mostly White students, 74% of Grade 3 students were on grade level in reading, while in schools serving mostly Latino students, only 51% met the same criteria.

Similarly, the National Center for Education Statistics showed that only 33% of 4th graders in the United States performed at or above the Proficient level in reading on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress ([NCES, 2022](#)). It is well known that reading difficulties can pose major barriers to academic success. Thus, students must receive research-based instruction that targets their specific skill gaps.

The science of reading indicates that following a systematic approach across multiple years allows children to develop skills at each level and advance in a sequence that promotes learning ([The Reading League, 2022](#); [Cowen, 2016](#)). Researchers agree that schools must improve access to rigorous, grade-level academics with targeted support to accelerate learning ([Lambert & Sassone, 2020](#)). Systematic, full-class instruction is an instructional approach that can help reduce intervention needs, especially when it includes adjustments and supports that help different students succeed.

Focusing on learning acceleration through high-quality instruction on grade-level materials rather than remediation can be especially beneficial for learning (Student Achievement Partners, 2021). Two key recommendations are suggested for post-COVID recovery. First, leaders should select a high-quality core curriculum that provides teachers with suggestions for in-the-moment support for students who struggle. Second, educators should select programs focusing on grade-level instruction for all students, with embedded diagnostics that assess student understanding at the lesson level. When high-quality core programs embed effective unit assessments that allow for adjustment of instruction, students can receive targeted support at the time when they need it.

95 Percent Group, LLC created [a core phonics curriculum](#) that would replace the phonics instructional lessons provided with a comprehensive core reading curriculum, typically the first 20 minutes of the reading block. The 95 Phonics Core Program® (95 PCP) is a whole-class, Tier 1 program designed for grades K-5 to address and prevent decoding gaps using explicit, structured phonics instruction with a gradual release model for 30 minutes daily. The first year of research on the

95 PCP at other districts presented strong results, according to the Evidence for ESSA website, showing higher literacy gains for schools randomly assigned to use the program (Schechter & Lynch, 2022) and for students within a mostly Hispanic and Indigenous population of students (Schechter, Lynch, & Ilievski, 2023).

Southside Independent School District implemented the 95 Phonics Core Program (95 PCP) for grade 3 instruction, including the unit assessments used to monitor student progress, inform response-to-intervention (RTI), and adjust support as needed. Special education students received push-in/inclusion support for 95 PCP. In addition to 95 PCP, Southside Independent School District used HMH Into Reading. This paper extends the Gross & Schechter (2023) study that demonstrates that gains in phonics scores predicted higher overall scores on i-Ready<sup>®</sup> by looking at how the same students performed on the end-of-year state assessment STAAR<sup>®</sup>.

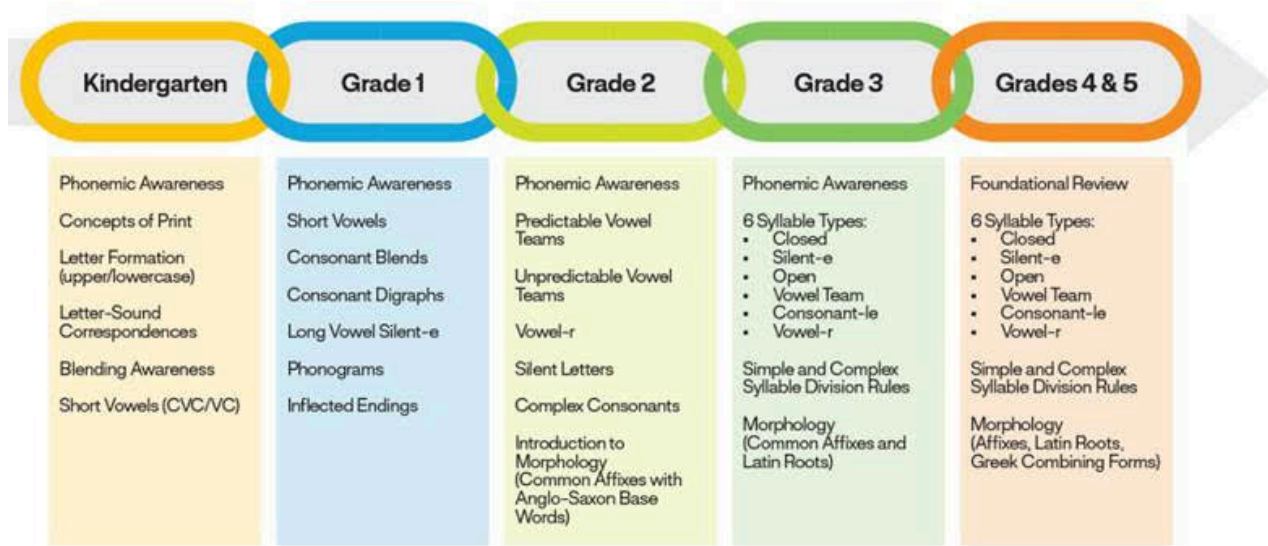
### Research questions

- What was the relationship between i-Ready EOY phonics scores and overall reading scores with STAAR scores?
- How do third graders' phonics score gains impact students' STAAR scores at the end of the year?
- How did improving phonics proficiency on i-Ready impact the likelihood of Approaching or Meeting (or Exceeding) standards on STAAR?

### Program Description

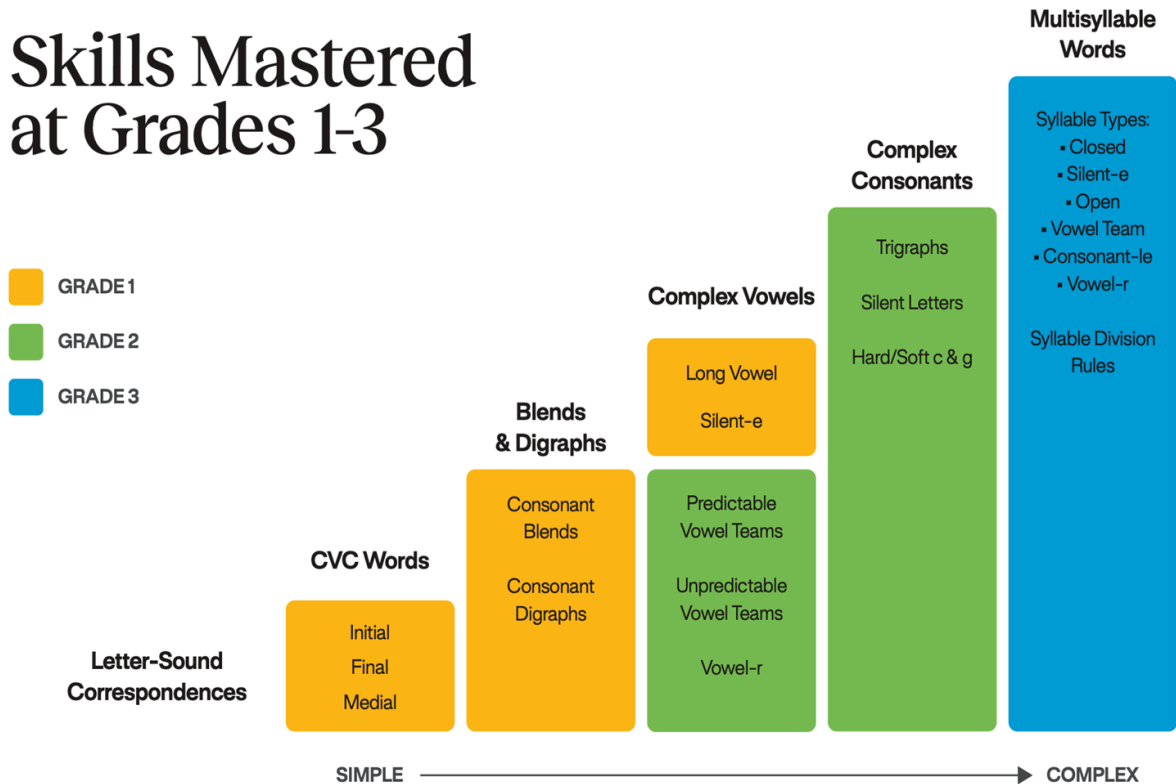
The 95 PCP is a whole-class, Tier 1 program designed for grades K-3 to address and prevent decoding gaps using explicit, structured phonics instruction with a gradual release model for 30 minutes per day. The program includes instructional dialogue and consistent routines outlined in the Teacher's Editions, digital presentation files designed to reduce teacher prep, and student workbooks that provide built-in practice for reinforcing skills. The program also offers sound spelling cards, phonics posters, and student manipulatives. 95 PCP for Grade 3 specifically focuses on using the previously taught foundational phonemic awareness and phonics skills to build automaticity in reading multi-syllable words in both isolation and in text. Instruction centers on explicitly teaching the six syllable types and the morphological structures of words. Decoding and encoding tasks ensure students have the word attack skills necessary for reading and writing text with increasing complexity.

95 Phonics Core Program Skills by Grade



95 Phonics Continuum

# Skills Mastered at Grades 1-3



## Method

### Participants

Phonics and overall reading skill scores were collected for four elementary schools in the Southside Independent School District in San Antonio, Texas, in the fall (BOY: beginning of year), winter (MOY: middle of year), and spring (EOY: end of year) of the 2022-2023 academic school year. The present study focuses exclusively on third graders. Of the 410 students with a BOY phonics skill score and no ‘red rush flag’ (which indicates when items have been answered too quickly, in less than 11 seconds), 93% were Hispanic, 79% were English Language Learners, 71% were economically disadvantaged, and 20% were special education students.

This district had substantially fewer students on grade level than found in national trends. The 2023 i-Ready report on national reading scores indicated that 65% of third graders were on grade level, and 19% were two or more years below grade level as of spring 2023 ([Curriculum Associates, 2023](#)). In the current sample, 26% were on grade level, and 68% were below grade level at BOY. This sample is nearly the opposite trend of the national average, indicating this district’s need for a higher quality Tier 1 curriculum.

### Measures

#### i-Ready Phonics and Overall Reading Scores

i-Ready is a computer adaptive screener intended to be a “temperature check” on students’ reading skills. It is designed to be as short as possible; it uses predictive analytics to determine how many questions each student gets and only uses items that help the algorithms know what the students’ scores should be. Each student’s scores are compared to a normed sample of students, all tested before the pandemic, and the scores are organized into benchmark categories. The present study examined Phonics Scale Scores and Overall Reading Scale Scores from fall, winter, and spring administrations of the i-Ready assessment.

#### STAAR Reading Language Arts Scores

State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR<sup>®</sup>) is a standardized academic achievement test designed to measure the extent to which a student has learned and can apply the defined knowledge and skills during the school year. The STAAR Reading Test contains a total of five paragraphs, 550–700 words in length, with each one being followed by eight questions surrounding the content. The STAAR utilizes paragraphs from various sources, such as fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. In addition to evaluating students’ vocabulary, the test assesses students’ understanding of

literary features (see more info [here](#)). The test scale scores identify students’ performance stratified against passing standards.

<b>Test Name</b>	<b>95 PCP Skills</b>	<b>i-Ready</b>	<b>STAAR</b>
<b>Skills Covered</b>	Sound-Spelling Mapping Sentence Dictation Sort Words Morphology Reading and Response	Foundational Skills: Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and High-Frequency Words Vocabulary Comprehension	Vocabulary Comprehension

### **Criteria for Phonics Grouping Classification**

The full sample comprised 410 students after subsetting to third graders and excluding cases where students on i-Ready had a ‘red rush flag’ indicating that they went through the test too quickly for the scores to be considered accurate. These 410 students are called the “full sample” within this study.

To create phonics groupings, third graders from each school were aggregated by beginning-of-year placement levels (via i-Ready), which reflected grade-level skills demonstrated by the student in the fall. BOY phonics placement levels classified students as exhibiting skills 3+ Years Below (kindergarten skills), 2 Years Below (first-grade skills), 1 Year Below (second-grade skills), or on/above grade level (third-grade level skills and beyond).

### **Previous Study’s Findings**

The results of the previous study showed that the 95 Phonics Core Program (95 PCP) is effective in improving the phonics skills of students on or below grade level, subsequently improving overall reading skills by the end of the year, evidenced by a significant increase in i-Ready scores over time. Almost half of the third graders (43%) started the year with kindergarten-level phonics skills (3+ years below). After one year, 63% advanced at least one grade level. Those phonics gains translated to overall reading score improvements, and 66% of third graders who started with overall reading scores at the K level advanced at least one grade level.

Focus on students who started below grade level:

- Additional analysis revealed that the 3+ years below phonics group made the most phonics gains in the fall term (BOY to MOY), which indicates that students quickly filled gaps and made accelerated phonics knowledge progress.
- In the spring term, the 3+ Years Below and 2 Years Below groups made strong gains, while the 3+ Years Below phonics group advanced the most during each term (BOY to MOY and EOY).
- The phonics “RtI triangle” essentially flipped from the start to the end of the year.
- A student’s BOY phonics placement had a .58 effect size on a student’s overall reading gains.

## State Test Results

To further understand the impact of the 95 PCP intervention, we examined STAAR state test results in conjunction with phonics improvement from BOY to EOY (measured by i-Ready) for students who received the intervention. The dramatic results add to our understanding of how important phonics is for overall reading/language arts achievement. While i-Ready Overall Reading Scale Scores include a phonics domain, the STAAR Reading Language Arts Scale Scores do not include explicit phonics-focused items. STAAR’s composite score focuses more on vocabulary and comprehension. Including state test scores thus provides additional evidence of the efficacy of the 95 PCP phonics intervention on global reading/language arts achievement, demonstrating a strong impact on third-grade composite scores where phonics is not weighted heavily. All phonics placement changes from BOY to EOY discussed were measured via i-Ready, whereas STAAR data is exclusively from EOY.

### Relation between i-Ready scores and spring STAAR Reading Language Arts Scale Scores

As expected, spring STAAR Reading Language Arts Scale Scores were significantly correlated with spring i-Ready scores. Scoring high on i-Ready was associated with scoring high on STAAR, which indicates that the tests successfully measure similar skills in terms of overall reading. Spring STAAR Reading Language Arts Scale Scores were highly correlated with spring i-Ready Overall Reading Scale Scores at .82 and moderately correlated with spring i-Ready Phonics Scale Scores at .54. The moderate correlation between STAAR and the phonics score indicates that the tests cover related but not identical skills. As expected, higher overall scores and phonics scores on i-Ready in the fall were associated with higher STAAR scores as well, indicating that fall scores are a good indicator of how students will perform on STAAR at the end of the year to best target intervention.

## Impact of phonics growth on STAAR Reading Language Arts performance levels

Three variables were created to examine the relation between the phonics intervention and STAAR Reading Language Arts performance levels based on i-Ready phonics improvement from BOY to EOY. Appendix Table A6 explains how the BOY and EOY i-Ready phonics placement data featured earlier in the present study were re-coded to glean further insights regarding the efficacy of the 95 PCP intervention and provides associated sample sizes and proportions per category. These variables enabled us to learn: 1) How many students who received the intervention improved at least one i-Ready phonics placement grade level from BOY to EOY; 2) How many grade levels students who received the intervention improved; 3) How many students who received the intervention changed from below grade level to on grade level.

STAAR scores are categorized ordinally into performance levels of Did Not Meet Grade Level, Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and then Masters Grade Level as the highest level. Students with performance level categorizations above Did Not Meet Grade Level (i.e., Approaches or better) received a passing score on the test. The three passing categories are cumulative such that if a student is in the top category, Masters Grade Level, then they are also categorized as having met the threshold for Approaches Grade Level & Meets Grade Level. Similarly, scoring in Meets Grade Level will also count toward Approaches Grade Level (Texas Education Agency, 2023).

A series of logistic regressions were performed with Approaches Grade Level or Meets Grade Level as the outcome variable and the three variables derived from i-Ready phonics placement changes from BOY to EOY as the explanatory variables: 1) whether students improved at least one grade level, 2) number of categories improved, and 3) whether the student increased to on/above grade level. Log odds were exponentiated to odds ratios, and can be interpreted as: ‘The odds of a performance level of [either Approaches Grade Level or Meets Grade Level] on the state test was \_\_\_ times higher for students in [group of interest], compared to [students in the other group].’

### Students who improved a grade level (or more) on phonics from BOY to EOY

*i-Ready grade level categorizations at BOY and EOY; relation with STAAR scores*

Per i-Ready phonics level categorizations, 69% of students who received the intervention who were below grade level at BOY improved at least one grade level by EOY. After filtering out the students who were missing i-Ready EOY placement data or were already on grade level at BOY (per i-Ready), we performed a logistic regression to compare the likelihood of a STAAR performance level of at least Approaches Grade Level for students who did or did not improve at least one i-Ready phonics placement grade level from BOY to EOY. The result was statistically significant ( $z = 4.10, p <$

.05). Students who improved at least one i-Ready phonics placement category from BOY to EOY were 4.54 times more likely to achieve a state test performance level of at least “Approaches.”

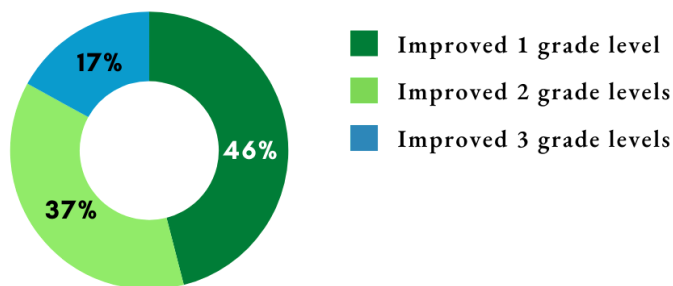
Next, we performed a similar logistic regression in which the dependent variable was instead whether the student’s STAAR performance level was at least “Meets.” The result was statistically significant ( $z = 2.34, p < .05$ ). Students who improved at least one i-Ready phonics placement category from BOY to EOY were 3.72 times more likely to achieve a state test performance level of at least “Meets.” (It makes sense that Meets Grade Level results show an attenuated version of the same pattern of the Approaches Grade Level model since the categorizations are cumulative such that students who achieve Approaches Grade Level had to exceed Meets Grade Level to gain Approaches Grade Level status.)

### The number of grade levels improved from BOY to EOY

*i-Ready grade level categorizations at BOY and EOY; relation with STAAR scores*

Of the students who moved up in phonics *at least* one grade level per i-Ready categorizations, the breakdown of how many grade levels students improved was: 46% improved one grade level, 37% improved two grade levels, and 17% improved three grade levels (depicted in Figure 1 below). Thus, the majority of students improved two or more grade levels. To formally examine the association between how strongly the intervention worked and state test performance, logistic regressions were performed comparing the odds of a STAAR placement level of at least Approaches Grade Level or Meets Grade Level depending on how many i-Ready phonics placement grade levels a student improved from BOY to EOY.

Figure 1. Percent of students who improved 1, 2, and 3 grade levels on STAAR.



For “Approaches,” the result was statistically significant for students who improved two ( $z = 4.58, p < .05$ ) or three ( $z = 3.47, p < .05$ ) i-Ready phonics placement levels from BOY to EOY. When



comparing the odds for each of the levels of improvement, the odds of achieving a STAAR placement level of at least Approaches Grade Level were 10.35 times higher for students who improved two i-Ready phonics categories from BOY to EOY and 10.98 times higher for students who improved three categories.

The results for Meets Grade Level were similar, with an attenuated pattern. The result for Meets Grade Level was statistically significant for students who improved two ( $z = 2.87, p < .05$ ) or three ( $z = 2.49, p < .05$ ) i-Ready phonics placement grade levels from BOY to EOY. When comparing the odds for each of the levels of improvement, the odds of achieving a STAAR placement level of at least Meets Grade Level was 1.67 times higher for students who improved one i-Ready category from BOY to EOY, 5.59 times higher for students who improved two categories; and 5.47 times higher for students who improved three categories.

*Table 1. Summary of STAAR Findings for Students who Improved on i-Ready*

<b>i-Ready Phonics Placement Level Change from BOY to EOY</b>	<b>Times More Likely</b>	<b>STAAR Performance Level</b>
Students who moved up at least one grade level	5x more likely to achieve	Approaches Grade Level or higher
	4x more likely to achieve	Meets Grade Level or higher
Students who moved up two grade levels	10x more likely to achieve	Approaches Grade Level or higher
	6x more likely to achieve	Meets Grade Level or higher
Students who moved up three grade levels	11x more likely to achieve	Approaches Grade Level or higher
	5x more likely to achieve	Meets Grade Level or higher

*Note.* All results in the table were statistically significant and are rounded to a whole number.

### **Improved to on/above grade level**

#### *i-Ready grade level categorizations at BOY and EOY; relation with STAAR scores*

Per i-Ready phonics level categorizations, 41% of students who received the phonics intervention who were below grade level at BOY rose to on/above grade level by EOY. To further assess how well the intervention worked for students who were below grade level at BOY, we performed a logistic regression to compare the likelihood of a STAAR performance level of at least Approaches Grade Level for students who ascended to grade level between BOY and EOY (per i-Ready). The result was statistically significant ( $z = 5.95, p < .05$ ). Students whose i-Ready phonics level rose from below

grade level at BOY to on/above grade level at EOY were 20.63 times more likely to achieve a state test performance level of Approaches Grade Level or higher, compared to their peers who were also below grade level at BOY.

We performed a similar logistic regression for students who were below grade level at BOY (per i-Ready phonics placement levels) in which the dependent variable was whether the student’s STAAR performance level was at least “Meets.” The result was statistically significant ( $z = 4.62, p < .05$ ). Students whose i-Ready phonics level rose from below grade level at BOY to on/above grade level at EOY were 8.29 times more likely to achieve a state test performance level of Meets Grade Level or higher.

*Table 2. STAAR Findings for Students who Achieved On/Above Grade Level on i-Ready*

<b>i-Ready Phonics Placement Level Change from BOY to EOY</b>	<b>Times More Likely</b>	<b>STAAR Performance Level</b>
Students who moved from below grade level at BOY to on/above grade level at EOY	21x more likely to achieve	Approaches Grade Level or higher
	8x more likely to achieve	Meets Grade Level or higher

*Note.* All results in the table were statistically significant and are rounded to a whole number.

### **Summary of frequencies across i-Ready grade level categorizations**

Taken together, the i-Ready phonics placement level results show that 69% of students who received the phonics program who were below grade level at BOY improved at least one grade level by EOY, and 41% rose to on/above grade level. Of the 69% of students who improved at least one grade level, 58% of those students rose to on/above grade level. The majority of below-grade level students who received the 95 PCP intervention improved at least one grade level within one school year, and the majority of those improvements were students moving up to grade level (all per i-Ready categorizations). Given the high proportion of students who were well below grade level at BOY, it is noteworthy that of the students who moved up, 46% improved one i-Ready phonics grade level, 37% improved two i-Ready phonics grade levels, and 17% improved three i-Ready phonics grade levels. Thus, 54% improved two or more grade levels. The results are especially exciting given that the sample primarily comprises ELL students and also has a relatively large SPED student group; it is highly encouraging that the full class intervention worked well for special populations.

## Discussion

A major question facing education leaders as they decide which programs to help their students is how to address the varying needs of students. Programs that need to fit into out-of-school time or pull students from class vary to the degree that they effectively differentiate instruction and may leave students continually playing catch-up with skills from previous grades rather than helping reduce gaps and bring them up to grade level. This paper examines the impact of increasing explicit phonics instruction in core instruction on state test scores.


### Tier 2 & 3 Students Benefit From Strong Tier 1 Phonics Instruction

The current study demonstrates that 95 PCP effectively closed third-graders' phonics knowledge gaps. The sample in the current study started with 75% of students below grade level in phonics at the beginning of the year (substantially more than the national average). By the end of the year, the phonics gap closed substantially, with 58% of students on grade level in phonics. The results showed that students below grade level especially benefited from the whole-class phonics instruction. These phonics gains also successfully translated into higher overall reading scores at the end of the year.

This paper used logistic regressions of STAAR EOY performance levels on phonics placement changes from BOY to EOY (via i-Ready scores). Log odds were exponentiated to odds ratios for interpretation, showing the odds of a given performance level for a given group compared to other groups. Advancing in phonics skills increased the likelihood of having advanced overall reading scores on i-Ready. Students who improved at least one grade level on Phonics were **5x more likely** to achieve a STAAR performance level of **Approaches Grade Level or higher**. Completely closing their phonics gaps, students who rose from below grade level on Phonics at BOY to on/above grade level at EOY were **over 20x more likely** to achieve **Approaches Grade Level or higher** and **8x more likely** to achieve **Meets Grade Level or higher**. These findings point to the importance of having a solid phonics foundation to achieve proficiency on third-grade state reading tests and that a core program can support providing this foundation.

## Conclusion

The present study's findings underscore phonics skills' crucial role in preparing third graders to pass state reading tests successfully. Regardless of their initial phonics scores, students in this study greatly benefited from a specialized whole-class instruction program tailored specifically for third graders. The 95 PCP curriculum offers grade-specific instructional materials, and in this particular case, third-grade students were taught using materials designed to reinforce foundational phonemic awareness and phonics skills. These skills are vital for developing the ability to read multi-syllable words both in isolation and within a text context.



Interestingly, it was observed that many students in the sample did not possess the expected phonics foundation for third grade. Nevertheless, those who received the third-grade version of the 95 PCP demonstrated significant improvement by the spring assessment. This compelling evidence highlights the effectiveness of the 95 PCP curriculum to fill gaps for students lacking adequate phonics skills.

This robust evidence is particularly promising in light of the persistent disparities in educational outcomes and the widespread learning loss. An effective core curriculum like the 95 PCP can potentially reduce the number of students requiring additional intervention services, ensuring that all students receive the necessary support without burdening educators. As demonstrated by this study, phonics skills play a pivotal role in this process, serving as a fundamental building block for reading success in third grade and beyond.

## Appendix

Table A1. *i-Ready Phonics Benchmark Categories for the Full Sample*

	EOY Phonics Group			
BOY Phonics Group	3+ Years Below Grade Level	2 Years Below Grade Level	1 Year Below Grade Level	On/Above Grade Level
3+ Years Below Grade Level (Total N=134)	48	48	11	27
2 Years Below Grade Level (Total N=78)	1	20	8	49
1 Year Below Grade Level (Total N=20)			2	18
On/Above Grade Level (Total N=92)	1	2	3	86
Total N EOY By Group	50	70	24	180

Table A2. *i-Ready Phonics Benchmark Categories for English Language Learners*

	EOY Phonics Group			
BOY Phonics Group	3+ Years Below Grade Level	2 Years Below Grade Level	1 Year Below Grade Level	On/Above Grade Level
3+ Years Below Grade Level (Total N=135)	35	39	11	26
2 Years Below Grade Level (Total N=84)	1	17	7	46
1 Year Below Grade Level (Total N=24)			2	17
On/Above Grade Level (Total N=81)		2	2	74
<b>Total N EOY By Group</b>	36	58	22	163

Table A3. *i-Ready Phonics Benchmark Categories for Special Education Students*

	EOY Phonics Group			
BOY Phonics Group	3+ Years Below Grade Level	2 Years Below Grade Level	1 Year Below Grade Level	On/above Grade Level
3+ Years Below Grade Level (Total N=58)	23	17	4	4
2 Years Below Grade Level (Total N=13)	1	1	2	8
1 Year Below Grade Level (Total N=5)				4
On/above Grade Level (Total N=7)				7
<b>Total N EOY by Group</b>	24	18	6	23

Table A4. BOY Phonics Groupings by EOY STAAR Performance Levels

	STAAR Performance Level			
BOY Phonics Group	Did Not Meet Grade Level	Approaches Grade Level	Meets Grade Level	Masters Grade Level
3+ Years Below Grade Level	49	32	8	2
2 Years Below Grade Level	12	33	20	1
1 Year Below Grade Level	0	8	6	0
On/Above Grade Level	3	15	35	26
Total N EOY By Group	64	88	69	29
Approaches or Better		186		
Meets or Better			98	

Table A5. BOY Phonics Groupings by i-Ready EOY Overall Placements

	i-Ready EOY Overall Placement			
BOY Phonics Group	3+ Years Below Grade Level	2 Years Below Grade Level	1 Year Below Grade Level	On/Above Grade Level
3+ Years Below Grade Level	35	59	18	22
2 Years Below Grade Level		14	27	37
2 Years Below Grade Level		1	9	10
On/Above Grade Level		3	6	83
Total N EOY By Group	35	77	60	152

Table A6. How BOY and EOY Phonics Placement Data Were Re-coded to Glean Further Insights

What the Variable Measures	How BOY and EOY Phonics Placement Data Were Re-coded to Glean Further Insights	Sample Size Per Category & Proportion Moved up to Focal Category
<p><b>Improved A Grade Level (Or More)</b></p> <p>Scale of measurement: nominal categories</p>	<p><b>This variable is coded to show <i>whether</i> a student improved grade levels from BOY to EOY.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students who improved at least one grade level were re-coded as "improved" (i.e., students who increased from LK for BOY phonics placement to L1, L2, or L3 at EOY; increased from L1 to L2 or L3; or increased from L2 to L3).</li> <li>- Any student who was in L3+ at BOY was coded as "already on grade level."</li> <li>- After re-coding L3+ cases, any student remaining who stayed the same or decreased was coded as "no improvement."</li> <li>- Any student missing EOY phonics placement data was coded as "missing."</li> </ul>	<p>Improved: 161            Already on grade level: 92            No improvement: 71            Missing: 86</p> <p>232 students below grade level at BOY with EOY data. <math>161/232 = .69</math> improved</p>
<p><b>Number of Grade Levels Improved</b></p> <p>Scale of measurement: ordinal</p>	<p><b>This variable is coded to show <i>how many grade levels</i> a student improved from BOY to EOY, where:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- NA = Student was either at L3+ at BOY (thus no room to improve as L3+ was the data collection ceiling) or was missing at EOY (thus no data to assess whether they improved).</li> <li>- 0 = No increase (student's phonics placement stayed the same from BOY to EOY).</li> <li>- 1 = Improved 1 level (from LK to L1, L1 to L2, or L2 to L3).</li> <li>- 2 = Improved 2 levels (from LK to L2 or L1 to L3).</li> <li>- 3 = Improved 3 levels (from LK to L3).</li> </ul>	<p>Stayed the same: 71            Improved 1 level: 74            Improved 2 levels: 60            Improved 3 levels: 27</p> <p><math>74/161 = .46</math>  <math>60/161 = .37</math>  <math>27/161 = .17</math></p>
<p><b>Improved to On/Above Grade Level</b></p> <p>Scale of measurement: nominal categories</p>	<p><b>This variable is coded to show <i>whether</i> a student with a <i>below</i> grade level phonics placement at BOY was <i>on/above</i> grade level at EOY.</b></p> <p>To identify students who placed at LK, L1, or L2 at BOY and then at L3+ at EOY, we coded:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students who moved from below L3+ to L3+ as 1.</li> <li>- Students who were already at L3+ or were missing placement data at EOY as NA.</li> <li>- Students who placed below L3+ at BOY and did not move to L3+ at EOY as 0.</li> </ul>	<p>Moved to L3+: 94            Already L3+: 92            No EOY data: 86            Didn't move to grade level: 138</p> <p>94 moved to L3+ / 232 students below grade level = .41</p> <p>161 improved, 94 moved to grade level. <math>94/161 = .58</math> of the improvements were to grade level</p>



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