

## A Profile of the Striving Readers Program: The Memphis School District Project

### The Federal Striving Readers Program

The Striving Readers program aims to support literacy interventions for adolescent readers in middle and high school. Funded at roughly \$30 million per year, the pilot program currently operates in eight sites: six large school districts, one consortium of multiple rural districts, and one statewide education system for students in the juvenile justice system. Focusing on Title I-eligible schools with significant numbers of students reading below grade level, Striving Readers projects must include three key components: (1) school wide cross-disciplinary strategies for improving student literacy, which may include professional development for subject-matter teachers and use of research-based reading and comprehension strategies in classrooms across subject areas; (2) targeted intervention for students who are reading significantly below grade level; and (3) a strong experimental evaluation component.<sup>1</sup>

### The Memphis Striving Readers Project

In 2006, Memphis City Schools was awarded \$16,074,687 for a five-year period (2006–11) for the Memphis Striving Readers Project, in collaboration with the University of Memphis and Bellarmine University (KY). Having already successfully partnered with Bellarmine University on an elementary literacy program, the school system was poised to develop and implement an adolescent literacy intervention program. The project serves more than five thousand students in eight middle schools.

MCS identified these eight low-performing, urban middle schools, grouped them in pairs by shared characteristics, and employed the Memphis Content Literacy Academy model as a school wide strategy at one school in each pair. This meant that four schools received the MCLA model while four schools with similar characteristics did not, allowing for a more accurate measure of impact.

For targeted interventions, which were implemented at all eight schools, Scholastic's *READ 180* was used to support more than seven hundred students who had scored in the bottom quartile on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program.

Evaluations were conducted for both the schoolwide and targeted interventions after the first year of implementation. Year two evaluations are currently under way.

#### A Profile of Memphis City Schools

- Memphis City is the most populous district in Tennessee, encompassing more than two hundred schools and serving over 100,000 students in grades K–12.
- 71 percent of the student population qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch.
- The student population is 86 percent African American, 8 percent white, and 6 percent other.

Sources: Tennessee State Department of Education, "Tennessee School Directory," <http://www.k-12.state.tn.us/sde/> (accessed June 10, 2009); Memphis City Schools, "MCS Quick Facts," [http://www.mcsk12.net/facts\\_about\\_mcs.asp](http://www.mcsk12.net/facts_about_mcs.asp) (accessed June 10, 2009); R. Potts et al., "Extending University-Urban School Partnerships: The Memphis Striving Readers Project," presented at AERA 2008 Annual Meeting, March 27, 2008, New York, New York.

## Schoolwide cross-disciplinary strategy

The goal of the Memphis Content Literacy Academy was to improve teachers' performance through professional development, onsite coaching, and leadership seminars. Professional development featured evening classes, grouped by content area, and daylong sessions, which involved all teachers participating in the program. Over the course of the first year of implementation, teachers involved in the program received approximately eighty-five hours of formal professional development. These sessions were designed to train teachers to create and implement action plans that embed adolescent literacy strategies (e.g., word walls, semantic feature analysis, choral reading, and student-generated questions) into content instruction. Onsite literacy coaches were also available to support science, social studies, math, and reading teachers in their content-area literacy instruction. And monthly leadership seminars, called Principals' Fellowships, informed school leaders of activities and resources at their disposal for engaging teachers and parents in their literacy efforts.

## Targeted intervention

The targeted intervention, *READ 180*, was used as a supplemental program, offered in addition to the regular English language arts courses, for up to two years. As a part of the intervention, students used computers, CD players with headphones, TVs with DVD players, and other traditional methods for reading instruction. *READ 180* was implemented in ninety-minute learning blocks with twenty minutes of instruction for the entire class. Afterward, students were broken into three rotating groups that included small-group instruction, modeled and independent reading, and independent learning through the use of program software.<sup>2</sup>

## Evaluation

Research for Better Schools, an educational nonprofit that is primarily funded by grants from the U.S. Department of Education, evaluated the schoolwide and targeted interventions of the program after the first year. In the schoolwide implementation, RBS reported that teachers perceived that they were more prepared to teach after receiving the services provided by MCLA and that this perception led them to use more literacy aids. For targeted implementation, the difference in impact after just one year was not significant between the four schools implementing *READ 180* and the four schools not implementing the program. RBS has already begun work on its year two evaluation and expects to publish the findings in the near future.<sup>3</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, <http://www.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders/index.html> (accessed May 8, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> D. Coffey and K. Feighan, "Striving Readers Implementation of the Targeted and the Whole School Interventions: Summary of Year 1 (2006–2007) Memphis City Schools July 2008," <http://www.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders/performance.html> (accessed May 8, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> "Memphis Striving Readers Grant: Preliminary Impact Memo for Year 1, February 1, 2008," [http://www.rbs.org/SiteData/docs/Impact\\_Memo\\_Year\\_1/d923f97d06f6c1fb217baf920133397d/Impact\\_Memo\\_Year\\_1.doc](http://www.rbs.org/SiteData/docs/Impact_Memo_Year_1/d923f97d06f6c1fb217baf920133397d/Impact_Memo_Year_1.doc) (accessed June 17, 2009).

