A CENSUS STUDY OF GEORGIA’S 2004-2006 READING FIRST SCHOOLS
AND THE ACHIEVEMENT OF STRUGGLING READERS

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ABSTRACT

Because children living in poverty and minorities consistently demonstrate persistent reading difficulties (Adams, 1990), Congress intervened and passed the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) mandating that scientifically based reading research be implemented in the primary grades. Quantitative studies presented in the literature consistently promote explicit instruction using a phonics-first approach (National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000). Because Georgia’s data are consistent with national trends, this study focuses on Georgia students considered at risk for reading failure. This study sought to answer one overarching question: Did at-risk readers demonstrate improvement in critical areas of reading when instructed in Georgia’s Reading First (RF) schools during 2004-2006? Utilizing the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS; Hoover, Dunbar, & Frisbie, 2003), with a reliability of .98, this study focused upon 27 elementary schools in Georgia that were awarded the Reading First grant during 2004-2006. At the conclusion of the 3-year study, 478 students were instructed for 3 years in a Georgia RF school and administered the ITBS for 3 years. The results of this study revealed that these students improved reading skills at a rate comparable to national data. Significantly, reading comprehension and vocabulary were critical areas in which general education Hispanic students and Black special education students demonstrated greater rates of improvement when compared to the rate of improvement from the national data. The implications of this study revealed that at-risk readers in Georgia experience reading gains when provided explicit and systematic reading instruction by trained teachers. This study substantiated previous reading research indicating that systematic, phonics instruction during the early elementary school years is critical in developing overall reading skills (NRP).