

**EVALUATION OF FLORIDA'S FAMILY LITERACY
AND READING EXCELLENCE (FLaRE) GRANT
COMPREHENSIVE THREE-YEAR EVALUATION REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In August, 1999, Florida was one of 17 states awarded a State Grant under the Federal Reading Excellence Act by the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE). At \$26 million, this grant was the largest single competitive grant ever awarded to Florida from the U.S. DOE. The competitive grant, entitled Florida's Family Literacy and Reading Excellence (FLaRE), supports and compliments other Florida Department of Education (DOE) efforts to accomplish its primary goal of all children reading on grade level by the end of grade three. Approximately \$23,000,000 was awarded in Local Reading Improvement (LRI) Grants to school districts and approximately \$2,800,000 in Tutorial Assistance (TA) Grants. School districts were invited to write competitive grant proposals aimed at instructional strategies for teaching reading in the primary grades. The reading strategies were required to include scientifically based research methods and materials as well as staff development activities. The grants also were required to contain components aimed at family literacy.

A major component of the FLaRE Grant was a comprehensive evaluation of the activities and accomplishments of the grant. The evaluation incorporated and integrated formative and summative components, and examined the processes used in purposefully selected local school district Local Reading Improvement and Tutorial Assistance sub-grants as well as the outcomes from all schools and districts. Evaluation Systems Design, Inc. (ESDI) was identified in the grant as a private/public partner to conduct the evaluation of the FLaRE Grant, and the Florida Department of Education contracted with ESDI to conduct the three-year Evaluation of the FLaRE Grant. This report is the final, comprehensive report for the three-year grant, culminating in the 2001-2002 school year. It contains detailed activities planned and accomplished for the three years of the FLaRE Grant, a listing of major accomplishments, and recommendations for implementation of similar federally funded reading program improvements.

FLaRE Evaluation Purpose and Questions

The purposes of the FLaRE comprehensive three-year evaluation were to establish baseline data on funded FLaRE districts and schools, document the implementation of the planned state grant and local subgrant activities, and determine the impact of the subgrant activities at the end of the third year of implementation. The FLaRE Evaluation Plan specified these evaluation questions:

1. To what extent did each funded project meet its grant objectives?
2. To what extent did each funded project implement programs founded on scientifically-based reading research?
3. How effective were the processes used by the grant programs?
4. What similarities and differences were noted in the processes used by the grant programs?
5. What impact did the Reading Excellence Grant programs have on students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community involvement?
6. To what extent did teachers incorporate appropriate reading instructional strategies into their classroom practices?
7. To what extent did the reading levels of students participating in the grant activities increase?
8. To what extent were programs targeted at diverse populations in Florida successful in closing the gap in reading levels?
9. To what extent did the Reading Excellence Grant programs reduce the referral and identification rates of students for special education programs?
10. To what extent did the programs impact system change?

In addition, ESDI collected and reported data that paralleled the national evaluation questions that included:

- ◆ What are the demographic and other characteristics of schools served by the Reading Excellence Act (REA)?
- ◆ Do REA programs meet the criteria defined in the legislation at the district and school level? What do REA programs look like? How are programs structured and what services do they provide? Are all program components being implemented fully and are models composed of aligned professional development, tutoring, and family literacy components? Are districts providing adequate technical assistance and support?
- ◆ How well are instructional strategies being implemented in schools and classrooms? How do schools choose reading materials and curricula? Are schools purchasing commercial materials and/or models?
- ◆ Are schools' reading curriculums aligned with their state assessments?
- ◆ What is the extent of teacher and principal knowledge of research-based reading instruction and how does it change over time?

- ◆ What are the program's effects on classroom instruction and teacher practice? What percentage of schools make effective changes in reading instruction? What percentage don't?
- ◆ What is the content and process for professional development offered in REA sites—typical and ranges? Have schools changed the way they deliver professional development?
- ◆ Do REA schools improve their reading achievement over time? Do REA schools that serve large numbers of children who are English language learners show similar gains?
- ◆ Are tutoring and family literacy components of high quality? How are they structured and how do they operate?
- ◆ How is REA coordinated with other support in the schools for reading improvement (state initiatives, Even Start, Title I, CSRD, and others)?

These evaluation questions continued into the third year of the evaluation with additional process data being collected and outcome data added to form conclusions for the comprehensive three-year final report.

FLaRE Evaluation Methodology –First Year

ESDI received the first contract to conduct the first year of the FLaRE Evaluation in December, 1999. Subsequent contracts have been awarded by the DOE to complete the three-year evaluation. During the first year of the FLaRE Grant, the DOE concentrated on the process of awarding the Local Reading Improvement (LRI) and Tutorial Assistance (TA) sub-grants to local school districts. ESDI staff generated a monitoring tool for use by the DOE in tracking implementation progress on the grant and by ESDI to document completion of planned grant activities. ESDI staff met monthly with DOE staff responsible for the grant to discuss the grant process, and at other times as needed to assist in the implementation process. Additionally, ESDI generated a FLaRE Comprehensive Evaluation Plan to guide the three-year statewide evaluation. After the LRI and TA sub-grants were awarded, ESDI staff conducted a series of regional site visits to provide initial information on the grants and the evaluation requirements to all funded local school districts. Products generated by ESDI for the FLaRE Evaluation during the 1999-2000 contract year included:

1. FLaRE Comprehensive Evaluation Plan.
2. FLaRE Quarterly Evaluation Report for Quarter 1, 2000.
3. Bidders Conference Evaluation Summary.
4. Evaluation of the Sub-Grant Proposal Review Process.
5. Selection of Instruments for the Statewide Evaluation of the FLaRE Sub-grants.
6. Evaluation Surveys.
7. Evaluation Interview Guides for Site Visits.
8. Evaluation Summary PowerPoint Presentation for Training Sessions.
9. Quarter 2, 2000 and Final Evaluation Report for 1999-2000.

Additional activities conducted by ESDI for the FLaRE Comprehensive Evaluation included:

1. attending two national conferences on the Reading Excellence Act evaluation;
2. evaluating the Bidder's Conference conducted by the DOE; and
3. observing the process used by the DOE to review and rate submitted sub-grant proposals from local school districts.

FLaRE Evaluation Methodology – Second and Third Years

During the second and third years of the FLaRE Evaluation (2000-2001 and 2001-2002) ESDI's efforts concentrated on documenting the continued implementation of the FLaRE Local Reading Improvement (LRI) and Tutorial Assistance (TA) grants. ESDI continued to generate quarterly reports documenting activities conducted on the FLaRE evaluation and meet regularly with DOE staff to review the state-level activities. Quarterly evaluation reports documented the activities of the evaluation and the progress on FLaRE activities. The evaluation incorporated the following data collection methods:

- ◆ **surveys** of four major groups of participants in the grants (district staff, principals, teachers, and parents);
- ◆ **site visits** to selected school districts and schools receiving grants;
- ◆ **interviews with selected** district staff, principals, teachers, and parents;
- ◆ **classroom observations** to document implementation of planned activities;
- ◆ **records reviews** of documents, staff development conducted, and integration of FLaRE activities with School Improvement Plans; and
- ◆ **student achievement data** to document initial impacts of the new reading strategies.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

The statewide comprehensive evaluation of the FLaRE Grant included multiple sources of data through multiple surveys of teachers, parents, principals, and district staff, and three sets of site visits that included interviews with many key stakeholders and members of the school community. Based on the results of these data collection efforts, the following conclusions are made for the three-year implementation of the Florida FLaRE Grant:

1. In 2000-2001, 12,561 students across six grade levels in 77 reporting schools participated in the LRI program, and 17,710 students participated in the 2001-2002 school year. The highest levels of participation were at Kindergarten with 5,109 students and first grade with 4,738 students. If these participation rates are prorated to the entire set of 154 schools receiving grants, approximately 35,420 students in Florida received benefits from the FLaRE LRI program in the 2001-2002 school year.

2. Florida's schools selected for FLaRE grants were primarily schools serving students from high poverty backgrounds with high rates of minority populations and high mobility rates.
3. Sixteen percent of the schools had less than 400 students, 33% had student membership ranging from 400-599, 36% had membership ranging from 600-799, 12% had membership ranging from 800-999, and 3% had more than 1,000 students in their schools.
4. Twenty-eight percent of the funded public schools serve 90% or more of their students in the Free/Reduced Priced Lunch Program, another 55% had levels of 70-89%, and 16% of the schools had levels between 50-69%.
5. Forty percent of the selected public schools served more than 90% minority student populations, another 21% had student populations with 70-89% minority students, 19% had 50-69% minority populations, and 20% had less than 49% minority students in their populations.
6. Sixty-seven percent of the selected schools served less than 10% of their student populations in the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) program, 25% had 10-29% in the LEP program, and only 8% of the schools had student populations with 30% or more of the students in LEP programs.
7. Fourteen percent of the selected schools had a 95+% stability rate, 56% had a 90-94% stability rate, 27% had a 85-89% stability rate, and only 3% had a stability rate of less than 85%.
8. The reading programs selected by the districts and schools varied in scope and intensity, ranging from phonics-based programs to balanced literacy approaches.
9. The instructional settings included individualized instruction, small group instruction, total class instruction, and pull-out programs.
10. Many of the FLaRE grant schools also received funding to implement other major programs during the 2000-2001 school year.
11. A total of 45 different reading programs were identified in the approved proposals for the Local Reading Improvement grants submitted by the school districts, 24 of which were implemented by more than one district. Some of the most commonly identified programs were: Accelerated Reader, Waterford Early Learning, Breakthrough to Literacy, SRA Reading Mastery, Earobics, Early Success Program (ESP), Language for Learning, Direct Instruction, Four Blocks Literacy Model, Success For All, and HOSTS (Help One Student To Succeed).
12. Reviews of the grants by the evaluators documented reading programs consisting of coordinated and aligned instructional strategies representing effective reading instruction and professional development components directly related to these instructional strategies.
13. Surveys and site visits documented the initial implementation of the FLaRE LRI grants during the 2000-2001 school year. Although some schools experienced delays early in the school year, almost all were implementing their selected FLaRE LRI programs by the second semester. Instructional programs and strategies for teaching reading varied widely, from scripted phonics-based programs to district-delivered training concentrating on increasing teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching a balanced literacy program.

14. Twenty-two percent of the schools responding to the surveys identified Prekindergarten as the grade level for implementation, 72% listed Kindergarten, 75% listed 1st grade, 49% identified 2nd grade, and 36% marked 3rd grade.
15. Schools frequently were implementing multiple programs in different configurations.
16. Over 40% of the responding teachers and 50% of the responding principals indicated that their programs involved computers being used for instructional, remedial, or assessment purposes.
17. The factor most frequently cited by principals as contributing to the selection of the LRI reading programs in the schools was district decision or input.
18. Twenty-three percent of the responding principals indicated in May of 2001 that the school was replacing a previous program with the reading program funded through the FLaRE grant, and 77% answered that the FLaRE reading program was expanding or continuing an existing program or complimenting and supplementing the current reading program.
19. The most frequently identified strategies for LRI grants in May of 2001, were: providing professional development for primary teachers (78%), increasing the use of diagnostic reading assessments (66%), increasing instructional time for reading (64%), and improving classroom management of reading instruction (63%).
20. For the LRI reading programs, the average number of minutes of reading instructional time in 1999-2000 was 88.1 that increased to 102.4 in 2000-2001. This increase was an average of 14.9 minutes of instruction in reading each day for children in primary grades in the LRI schools.
21. Seventy-two percent of the responding district staff from districts with LRI grants strongly agreed, and 20% agreed that the selected reading program has a strong research basis with evidence of student achievement growth. Teachers also responded positively to this item with 75% agreement that the selected reading program has a documented record of success with students like those in their schools.
22. Seventy percent (70%) or more of the teachers and principals with LRI programs identified the major focus areas of their selected programs as including phonemic awareness, alphabetic and phonemic decoding, fluent sight word vocabulary, reading comprehension, reading fluency, and vocabulary increases.
23. Approximately three-fourths of the responding LRI teachers described their selected LRI reading program as providing small group instruction, 82% marked individualized instruction, 63% marked total group instruction, and 35% characterized their selected program as a pull-out program.
24. Eighty-six percent (86%) of the responding principals in April of 2002 (94%) stated that their LRI program was in full implementation, and 14% indicated they were in partial implementation.
25. Almost all of the responding principals (94%) and teachers (89%) agreed or strongly agreed in May of 2001 that they currently had a thorough understanding of the school's selected reading program and strategies.
26. Almost all of the responding district staff and principals (96% and 99%, respectively) and 85% of the teachers were in agreement that the training conducted for the selected program provided adequate content knowledge and preparation to begin the program.

27. District staff (96%), principals (97%), and teachers (91%) were in strong agreement that the materials (books and other resources) needed to implement the selected reading program were readily available.
28. Eighty-four percent (84%) of the district staff, 95% of the responding principals, and 81% of the responding teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the schools had sufficient faculty and staff to implement fully the selected program.
29. The average (mean) number of days of training for the FLaRE LRI grants reported in 2001-2002 was 8.2, the median (mid-point in the distribution) was 5, and the range was from no (0) training days to 63 training days.
30. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of the responding schools in April 2002 trained less than 20% of their faculty, 22% trained 20%-49% of their faculty, 18% trained 50%-99% of the faculty, and 31% of the schools trained all of the faculty (100%).
31. Sixty-four percent (64%) of the responding district staff and 68% of the responding principals agreed or strongly agreed that as a result of their selected LRI reading program, more books and instructional materials have been added to the media center.
32. Parents agreed (86%) that as a result of the new LRI reading program their children were learning more, and 84% of the responding parents indicated they were spending more time reading with their children. Responding parents were in overwhelming agreement (92%) that the schools should continue the new reading programs.
33. District staff (68%) and principals (75%) agreed that because of their selected reading programs, parents were more actively involved in reading instruction and in helping their children at home, but teachers were much less positive, with only 46% agreeing.
34. District staff, principals, and teachers overwhelmingly responded in their surveys that as a result of their selected reading programs and strategies, students in the schools were reading better (100%, 96%, and 85%, respectively).
35. District staff, principals, and teachers identified a variety of changes being made in classrooms and impacts on teachers and principals from the first year of LRI grant implementation. Overwhelmingly, these changes were seen as beneficial and increasing the quality of instruction in reading. Some examples of the changes were increased confidence of teachers, schoolwide changes in the methods for teaching reading, increased efforts to meet school improvement goals and the state's Sunshine State Standards, and increased student enthusiasm and motivation for reading.
36. A total of 13 different reading programs were identified in the approved TA proposals submitted by the school districts, 5 of which were implemented by more than one district. The most commonly implemented programs included: HOSTS, Lightspan, Early Success Program (ESP), Success For All, and Parents to Kids.
37. For TA grants, 72 grade levels were involved in TA grants across the 26 responding schools on the April 2002 survey, with the preponderance of the implementation in Kindergarten, first, and second grades at 25% at each grade level.
38. Site visits in February and April-May of 2001 documented that most of the TA grants had just begun implementation in the spring of 2001. Many districts and schools did not receive notification of their grant awards until late in the fall of the school year or even after Christmas. Schools had to hire staff for the program, reorganize schedules, arrange for space, and purchase the programs and materials prior to implementation. These delays in implementation reduced the amount of time devoted to improving reading levels of students.

39. District staff, principals, and teachers were overwhelmingly positive in their perceptions that the LRI grants and TA grants have been beneficial for the school and had a positive impact on the school (agreement rates ranging from 88% to 100%). These grant programs have been very well received by the districts and schools, and are perceived to be a positive factor in their efforts to increase the reading skills and comprehension of students.
40. The median third grade norm-referenced test percentiles for FLaRE schools from the 2000 school year prior to the implementation of the grants, and in the 2002 school year after approximately 1 ½-2 years of implementation, increased from 34 in the spring of 2000 to 42 in the spring of 2002, representing an increase of 8 percentiles over the two years. Note that most FLaRE schools implemented their grants with students in Kindergarten to second grade, so the full impact of the FLaRE program changes on third grade scores will not be evidenced for another two years.
41. Thirty-five percent (35%) of the schools demonstrated an increase in school grades of one grade point, and an additional 6% increased their school grades two or three grade levels.
42. The Florida Department of Education is to be commended for their thorough process used to award LRI and TA Grants in accordance with the requirements of the federal Reading Excellence Act and their approved state grant.
43. The Florida Department of Education provided timely assistance to school districts in increasing their knowledge of current research on reading and in writing their grants.
44. Although some of the additional training and technical assistance planned by the Florida Department of Education has been delivered through the FLaRE Center at the University of Central Florida and the regional Area Centers for Educational Enhancement, many districts and schools were not aware of any assistance being provided by these sources.
45. Most schools and districts returned evaluation data and reports that documented increases in student achievement levels in reading for the grade levels served by the FLaRE Grants. These results, however, usually did not use normed achievement tests or comparison classes or schools against which to judge the progress of the students.
46. Overall, the FLaRE Grants were very positively received by local school districts and schools with extensive evidence of implementation and considerable documentation of increases in student performance levels. Undetermined, however, is whether these increases in student performance levels were higher than what would have occurred without the grant funding.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were generated to assist the Florida Department of Education in applying the lessons learned from implementing the FLARE grants to the new federally funded *Reading First* grant.

1. **Conceptual Framework.** Future reading initiative should provide a clear conceptual framework within which instruction in reading will be delivered. Holding advanced meetings to explicate and clarify the conceptual framework for potential grant recipients will increase the likelihood that the grant funds will be used to support and enhance improved instruction in reading.
2. **Funding Cycles.** Initial startup of new reading initiatives in Florida should consider the schedule of advanced planning and ordering needed to support a new grant in local school districts. Districts and schools can implement most effectively if notification of the grant awards are made no later than March of the previous year. This timeframe allows schools to organize and conduct training over the summer and to order books and materials prior to the opening of school.
3. **Proposal Review Process.** The reviews of proposals for any new reading initiative should incorporate precise criteria, especially for the definitions of “research-based” reading programs. Delineating these criteria in advance and communicating them clearly to potential grant recipients will increase the use of research-based reading programs in Florida’s public schools and reduce confusion over the qualifications of proposals for funding.
4. **Professional Development.** Future reading initiatives should be accompanied by systematic and intensive professional development of teachers, principals, and district staff in the new instructional approach and strategies. This training should have clearly defined objectives, consistent supporting materials and documents, and evaluation methods that certify the participants have mastered the concepts and information presented in the training. Training systems should be in place to ensure that all teachers delivering the new reading programs receive consistent training across the state.
5. **Project Awareness.** The Department should increase efforts to generate an identity for the new reading initiatives. Creating an identity in the funded schools for the new grant program will increase cohesion and support for the new instructional efforts and make it more likely that the new strategies will be institutionalized within the school. Some actions to increase project awareness are creating a logo for identification of the new initiative, generating a website for grantees to share information, holding statewide or regional meetings of the grantees, and communicating frequently with the grantees about the initiative.
6. **Coaching and Mentoring.** The Department should institute a system of coaching and mentoring for the new grantees of future reading initiatives to provide onsite technical assistance and small group training as needed. During initial startup and implementation, new grantees will need technical assistance and clarification on specific strategies to use in classrooms that increase reading performance levels of students. Some organizations and groups that may be part of the coaching and

mentoring efforts include local school districts, Area Centers for Educational Enhancement, the FLaRE Center at the University of Central Florida, and the newly established Florida Center for Research on Reading.

7. **Monitoring.** The Florida Department of Education should provide systematic monitoring in local districts to ensure schools are implementing their grants as approved. The monitoring system should be implemented by people with experience and expertise in reading programs as well as grants management. The monitoring system should be coordinated with and feed into the coaching and mentoring system to ensure schools receive appropriate technical assistance in a timely manner to maximize the opportunities for success for the grants.
8. **Evaluation.** The Florida Department of Education should require grantees for any new reading initiative to administer one standardized achievement test with a norm basis as a pretest and posttest to all participating students by grade level to ensure a system of data collection that can document success or failure of the new reading strategies used by teachers. The evaluation system should also include a process evaluation to determine if the strategies are actually being employed in the classrooms. A state level evaluation of the overall success of the new reading initiative should also be conducted.
9. **Celebrating Success.** Opportunities for the staff in newly funded grant schools to share successes from their grants should be provided. This strategy increases support for the new reading initiative and provides a forum for disseminating successful efforts.
10. **State Level Staffing.** Staffing for any new statewide initiative must be sufficient to ensure coordination of the multiple implementation strategies and efforts. Adequate staffing at the state level will facilitate the visibility needed to make the new initiative successful at the district and school levels.

A complete copy of the FLaRE Evaluation Comprehensive Three-Year Final Report can be located on ESDI's website (www.esdi.cc).