

# The Reading First Program and Statewide-Mandated Assessments: A Three-Year Comparative Study

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**Abstract:** This three-year comparative study investigated the impact of the Reading First (RF) Program on student performance as measured by statewide-mandated English Language Arts (ELA) assessment programs. A matching procedure was used where 3 RF schools and 3 non-RF schools from two rural school districts in north Louisiana were matched. The ELA test scores of 882 third grade students and 909 fourth grade students in the Louisiana statewide ELA assessment programs between 2006 and 2008 were analyzed. The findings indicated that the RF students performed better than the non-RF students for these three years. The study provided evidence that the federal initiative of disseminating research-based reading instructional strategies into high-poverty, low-performing schools was successful.

**Key words:** reading first; rural schools; statewide assessment; elementary schools; reading

## 1. Reading First: A Federal Reading Initiative

### 1.1 No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and Reading First Initiative

Reading First (RF) was established under Title I, Part B, Subpart 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Center for Child Development, 2006). The U.S. Department of Education (2002) stated that the RF program was the academic keystone of NCLB. It was the largest and most focused early reading initiative that the United States has ever undertaken.

RF was designed to bridge the achievement gap between different groups of students by ensuring that more children received effective reading instruction in the early grades (Center for Child Development, 2006). The purpose of the RF program was to ensure that all children in the United States learned to read fluently by the end of Grade 3 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), thereby ensuring that every student could read at or above grade level by Grade 4. This goal was established because children who were not proficient readers by the end of

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fourth grade were not likely to be proficient readers in their lifetime (Learning Point Associates, 2004). As a result, it was imperative to ensure that students were successful readers in the elementary grades rather than providing remedial reading instruction in the later grades.

The RF program focused on implementing proven methods of early reading instruction in classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2008a). Through RF, states and school districts received support to apply scientifically based reading research (SBRR) as well as the proven instructional and assessment tools consistent with this research to ensure that all children learned to read well by the end of the third grade. The program also provided formula grants to states that submit an approved application. State education agencies (SEAs) awarded subgrants to eligible local education agencies (LEAs) on a competitive basis. SEAs funded those proposals that showed the most promise for raising student reading achievement and for successful implementation of reading instruction, particularly at the classroom level. Funds were allocated to states according to the proportion of children age 5 to 17 who resided within the state and who were from families with incomes below the poverty line. The U.S. Department of Education was authorized to reserve up to 2.5% for national activities and program evaluation and \$5 million for information dissemination activities. Since 2002, the U.S. government has appropriated approximately \$1 billion every year for RF (Center on Education Policy, 2007).

The RF initiative provided guidance on several essential elements, which could be thought of as four “pillars” of an effective reading program (Learning Point Associates, 2004). The four pillars were: (1) valid and reliable assessments, (2) instructional programs and aligned materials, (3) aligned professional development, and (4) dynamic instructional leadership.

### **1.2 Valid and Reliable Assessments**

The RF program provides the selection and administration of valid and reliable assessments that help teachers know what skills students have acquired, which students are experiencing difficulty, and how much progress students have made. This is accomplished through the use of screening, diagnostics, progress monitoring, and classroom-based instructional reading assessments. These assessments are ongoing and include both formal (standardized and quantitative) and informal measures of students’ reading skills. The measures will serve as a guide for teachers in planning and evaluating instruction to identify and overcome reading barriers facing their students (Learning Point Associates, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

### **1.3 Instructional Programs and Aligned Materials**

The RF program provides the necessary assistance for states and school districts to establish research-based reading programs for students in K-3 classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). It offers assistance in selecting or developing effective instructional materials, programs, learning systems and strategies to implement research-based methods to teach reading, which address the five essential components of effective reading instruction. These programs and materials provide instruction that is explicit (focused, clear, and involves much teacher modeling) and systematic (precisely planned, sequenced, and comprehensive). Students are given ample time to learn, practice, and apply the skills they have been taught in reading meaningful text (Learning Point Associates, 2004).

### **1.4 Aligned Professional Development**

RF funds focus on providing significantly increased teacher professional development to ensure that all teachers have the skills they need to teach the specific instructional programs effectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The professional development is tailored to support the instructional program teachers are using as well as the academic standards adopted at the state level. The learning experiences give teachers time to acquire

new knowledge of how to assess and teach the five essential components. These experiences also render teachers support for putting the new knowledge into practice with their students and feedback on their implementation of new teaching practices (Learning Point Associates, 2004).

### **1.5 Dynamic Instructional Leadership**

RF recognizes the critical role of instructional leaders. Instructional leaders provide coaching and support and are responsible for establishing and communicating clear goals and expectations for student learning. Administrators at the school district and building levels must be ready to provide the resources needed to ensure that schools are making adequate progress (Learning Point Associates, 2004).

## **2. Purpose of the Study**

While considerably research has been conducted to examine the impact of NCLB on urban schools, less attention has been paid to investigate the experiences of rural school districts in their implementation of NCLB, particularly RF. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether elementary RF students have better academic performances in the statewide-mandated testing in English Language Arts (ELA) when compared with those in non-RF schools in rural school districts. A comparative study was conducted in which the researchers examined the third and fourth grade students' ELA achievement in the statewide mandated assessments between 2006 and 2008.

## **3. Characteristics of Rural School Districts**

Kollie (2007) examined the characteristics of rural school districts from several perspectives which included funding, poverty, administration, and staffing. When compared with urban school districts, there was a huge difference in the amount of funding received by rural districts. State governments had a tendency to ensure that each school district received the exact amount of funds based on an established formula. However, in reality, some districts required more money because they were in isolated areas. State funds were augmented by the local tax base that each local school district generated. Nevertheless, when a school district had a poor tax base, it created large amounts of inequality between the kinds of education afforded by rural districts as compared with urban districts. Because of the lack of funds, rural districts experienced problems that occurred in different areas including recruitment and retention of highly-qualified teachers, facilities construction and maintenance, purchase of new textbooks, and technology.

Moreover, even though both urban and rural school districts were confronted with the issues of poverty, the solutions for dealing with poverty would not be the same. The reasons were because of scale where rural districts were smaller, and because of the differences in school finance policies and teacher salary policies. A state might provide more money per under-privileged students to districts experiencing poverty. However, owing to the policies that gave higher salaries to urban teachers because of the higher cost of living than in rural areas, the rural school district might not receive enough funding (Kollie, 2007).

As far as the characteristics of administration were concerned, the administration of rural districts was much different from urban districts. First and foremost, scale was a factor. Urban districts usually were larger with specialized administrators. One superintendent might have a few assistant superintendents to perform various functions. Meanwhile, rural districts were smaller and might not even have an assistant superintendent. The superintendent might have to perform different roles. In addition, rural communities had dense relationships

where people were related to each other. The superintendent and principals in a rural community were genuine community leaders who possessed a whole set of outreach and relationship-building skills that were different from what urban leaders had to have (Kollie, 2007).

In addition, rural districts found it extremely difficult to staff their classroom with highly-qualified personnel. This was because teachers wanted to work in places with superb facilities. When these facilities could not be found in rural districts, they moved to urban districts. Teachers might embark on their careers in rural areas and then move up to higher-paying districts. Ironically, the less-qualified teachers stayed working in high-poverty rural districts.

On the other hand, Kollie (2007) contended that rural districts also enjoyed several advantages. One advantage was less severe student behavior problems in rural districts than in urban districts. Less behavior challenges meant fewer challenges in teaching and learning. Another advantage was the tendency for rural communities to be more supportive of their schools. This was because the life of rural community was built around the schools.

#### **4. Reading First Program and Rural School Districts**

In 2008, Center on Education Policy issued a report which investigated the impact of NCLB on student reading achievement and teacher quality in rural school districts (Zhang, 2008). The report unveiled the findings drawn from the 2006-2007 national survey of NCLB implementation in 349 responding school districts, and from interviews with administrators in 8 rural districts in various geographic locations. Among the 349 responded districts, 116 of them were identified as rural according to their Metropolitan Statistical Code variable in the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data database.

One of the major findings about some rural districts and NCLB was that among those rural school districts that received Reading First subgrants, about 79% viewed the instructional programs and assessments systems of RF as important/very important contributors to improved achievement in English Language Arts (ELA) as compared with the non-rural school districts, only 57% and 59%, respectively (Zhang, 2008).

Moreover, during the interview, several rural administrators pointed out that individualized instruction was an effective strategy for improving rural student achievement. The characteristics of rural schools helped facilitate this type of instruction, namely small class sizes and limited enrollments. For instance, according to Principal Randy Thudin of the Cloquet district in Minnesota, the small school size, staff stability, and close relationship with the community helped address the needs of individual students. The principal stated that even with a majority of students coming from low-income families, the students did well on statewide assessment (Zhang, 2008).

#### **5. Methodology**

This study attempted to conduct a more exact comparison between RF schools and non-RF schools in rural areas. A matching procedure was adopted for the selection of rural schools in the research design. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) defined matching as the selection of research participants for the experimental and control groups in such a manner that they were closely comparable on a pretest that measures either the dependent variable or a variable that was closely correlated with the dependent variable.

The RF schools and the non-RF schools were chosen which had similar demographics and school performance scores. The demographics included the geographical location of the school districts, free or reduced

lunch percentage of the schools, socio-economic status of students' family, and ethnicity of the school population.

### 5.1 Sample

In Louisiana, there were 113 elementary schools receiving Reading First funds in 2007 and 40 of them were located in rural areas. This study was conducted in six elementary schools of two rural school districts. One of the school districts was located in the north central part of Louisiana and the other was located in the northeastern region of the state. One of the districts was a RF school district. Its RF grant application was approved in June 2004.

The researchers intentionally matched the schools in both of the rural school districts based on school performance and free or reduced lunch percentages. Table 1 and Table 2 provide the demographic information of the schools between 2005 and 2007.

**Table 1 School Demographics (School Year 2005-06)**

Schools	Treatment Group			Schools	Control Group		
	October 2005 Enrolment	October 2005 Free/reduced lunch	SPS		October 2005 Enrolment	October 2005 Free/reduced lunch	SPS
RFS1 (PK-8)	360	84%	63.1	NRFS1 (PK-5)	756	76%	66.1
RFS2 (PK-8)	432	74%	74.5	NRFS2 (PK-12)	342	74%	74.3
RFS3 (PK-8)	516	85%	78.5	NRFS3 (PK-12)	423	73%	76.4

Note: RFS: Reading first school; NRFS: Non-reading first school; SPS: School performance score.

**Table 2 School Demographics (School Year 2006-07)**

Schools	Treatment Group			Schools	Control Group		
	October 2006 Enrolment	October 2006 Free/reduced lunch	SPS		October 2006 Enrolment	October 2006 Free/reduced lunch	SPS
RFS1 (PK-8)	370	81%	61.7	NRFS1 (PK-5)	724	77%	68.5
RFS2 (PK-8)	416	66%	74.9	NRFS2 (PK-12)	367	71%	75.3
RFS3 (PK-8)	550	85%	80.1	NRFS3 (PK-12)	392	77%	79.1

Note: RFS: Reading first school; NRFS: Non-reading first school; SPS: School performance score.

The sample consisted of 882 third grade students and 909 fourth grade students from three RF schools and three non-RF schools. The students in the non-RF schools served as the control group. All of the students in both school districts received instruction in inclusive classrooms.

### 5.2 Instrumentation

Beginning in spring 2006, the *integrated* Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (*i*LEAP) was administered to assess public school students at grades 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9 (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007a). The *i*LEAP tests consist of both a norm-referenced test (NRT) and a criterion-referenced test (CRT) in English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. NRT is a measurement in which an individual's score on a test is interpreted by comparing it to the scores earned by a norming group; whereas an individual's score on a CRT is interpreted by comparing it to a prespecified standard of performance (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Specifically, the Louisiana Department of Education (2008) provided information regarding these two components of the assessment program in the *i*LEAP 2008 Interpretive Guide.

The grade 3 *i*LEAP ELA test consists of four parts: (a) Writing, (b) Using Information Resources, (c)

Reading, (d) Language (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007a). The test includes NRT and CRT items. The NRT items are from the survey battery (short form) of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. Most of the items measure Louisiana Grade Level Expectations (GLEs). The survey battery is used to provide national norms. Reading and Language are the NRT components. The CRT items are aligned with Louisiana GLEs and were developed to measure GLEs not assessed by the NRT items. Writing and Using Information Sources are the CRT components (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007a).

In the Writing section, the third grade students are asked to write a composition in response to a writing prompt. The mode of writing is narrative or descriptive. The Writing test is untimed, but students are given a minimum of 45 minutes to plan and finish their writing. As for Using Information Resources, students review four to six reference sources and respond to 8 multiple-choice questions in 40 minutes. As for the parts of Reading and Language, students are given 60 minutes to respond to 70 multiple-choice questions. The Reading test includes questions on vocabulary and reading comprehension. The Language test contains questions about spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and usage and expression (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007a).

The validity and reliability of *iLEAP* are given in the *iLEAP 2007 Technical Summary* (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007b). Content validity was the primary form of validity on which *iLEAP* tests were reviewed. Content validity measures the extent to which inferences from a test's scores adequately represent the content or conceptual domain that the test is claimed to measure (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). The Technical Summary described the content validity review process and stated that the content validation of *iLEAP* tests was incorporated into all steps of the development and analysis process. As for the reliability of *iLEAP*, Cronbach's alpha of .92 and the stratified alpha of .93 were reported for the third grade ELA test.

The Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) is a criterion-referenced testing program, which measures how well a student has mastered the state content standards (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007c). LEAP is administered at grades 4 and 8 to assess student performance in ELA, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. The students receive scaled scores on their tests and one of the five achievement ratings: advanced, mastery, basic, approaching basic, and unsatisfactory.

The grade 4 LEAP ELA test consists of four parts: (a) Writing, (b) Reading and Responding, and (c) Using Information Sources, and (d) Proofreading. It includes a written composition, short-answer questions, and multiple-choice questions. In the Writing section, students are asked to write a composition in response to a writing prompt. The mode of writing alternates between narrative and descriptive. In the Reading and Responding section, students are asked to read four passages and respond to 20 multiple-choice questions and 8 short-answer questions. The Using Information Resources consists of 5 multiple-choice questions and 2 short-answer questions. Lastly, the Proofreading consists of 8 multiple-choice questions (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007d).

The Louisiana Department of Education also used content validity to review the validity of LEAP. It was stated in the 2006 Technical Summary that the content validity for LEAP tests was "built into the test during the development and decisions about student knowledge or achievement in the various content domains should be valid" (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006, p. 6). As for the reliability of LEAP, Stratified alpha of .91 and Cronbach's alpha of .91 were reported for the grade 4 ELA test.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Grade 3 Integrated Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (iLEAP)

Two separate dependent sample *t*-tests (Cage, 1980) were performed to determine if there were significant differences in the iLEAP ELA mean scores for the third grade students in both of the RF schools and the non-RF schools between 2006 and 2008.

The results showed that the third grade RF students' 2008 iLEAP ELA mean score ( $M = 305.13$ ,  $SD = 50.491$ ) was greater than the 2006 iLEAP ELA mean score ( $M = 288.36$ ,  $SD = 55.092$ ). A dependent sample *t* of 2.474 was found with a mean difference of 16.77. The difference was found to be statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). In the non-RF schools, the 2008 iLEAP ELA mean score ( $M = 274.06$ ,  $SD = 60.892$ ) was numerically greater than the 2006 iLEAP ELA mean score ( $M = 271.93$ ,  $SD = 59.347$ ). However, this difference was not statistically significant ( $t = 0.3153$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

To assess the impact of the RF program on the Grade 3 iLEAP ELA assessment, one-way ANOVAs were used to compare the group means of RF schools and the non-RF schools in 2006, 2007, and 2008. The Analysis of Variance showed that in 2006 there was a significant difference for iLEAP ELA mean scores between the RF schools and non-RF schools ( $F(1, 277) = 5.544$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ). The difference favored the RF schools ( $p < 0.05$ ). For 2007 Grade 3 iLEAP ELA mean scores, the difference was found statistically significant ( $F(1, 319) = 5.976$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ), favoring the RF schools. In 2008 there was a significant difference for iLEAP ELA mean scores between the RF schools and non-RF schools ( $F(1, 280) = 21.079$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The difference also favored the RF schools ( $p < 0.001$ ). The effect sizes (Hedges' *g*) for the significant group means were 0.29, 0.27, and 0.56, respectively which were considered as small to medium.

The means, the standard deviations, the effect sizes of the iLEAP ELA scores are presented in Table 3. In summary, the iLEAP ELA mean scores of the RF schools were higher than that of the non-RF schools for 2006, 2007, and 2008. The differences in the mean scores were significant for all these years.

**Table 3 The Means of Grade 3 iLEAP ELA Scores**

Year	RF schools			Non-RF schools			Hedges' <i>g</i>
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
2006	118	288.36*	55.092	161	271.93	59.347	0.29
2007	143	288.99*	57.893	178	273.12	57.692	0.27
2008	126	305.13***	50.491	156	274.06	60.892	0.56

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

### 6.2 Grade 4 Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP)

Two separate dependent sample *t*-tests (Cage, 1980) were performed to determine if there were significant differences in the LEAP ELA mean scores for the fourth grade students in the RF schools and the non-RF schools between 2006 and 2008. In the RF schools, the fourth grade students' 2008 LEAP ELA mean score ( $M = 305.17$ ,  $SD = 51.965$ ) was higher than the 2006 LEAP ELA mean score ( $M = 294.74$ ,  $SD = 56.801$ ). The difference was not statistically significant ( $t = 1.559$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

In the non-RF schools, the fourth grade students' 2008 LEAP ELA mean score ( $M = 289.06$ ,  $SD = 54.505$ ) was higher than the 2006 LEAP ELA mean score ( $M = 276.70$ ,  $SD = 70.512$ ). A dependent samples *t* of 1.919 was found with a mean difference of 12.36. The difference was found to be statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

To assess the impact of the RF program on the Grade 4 LEAP ELA assessment, one-way ANOVA procedures were applied to the group means of the RF schools and the non-RF schools in 2006, 2007, and 2008. The Analysis of Variance showed that in 2006 there was a significant difference for LEAP ELA mean scores between the RF schools and the non-RF schools ( $F(1, 314) = 5.813, p = 0.016$ ). The difference favored the RF schools ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The 2007 LEAP ELA mean scores of the RF schools and the non-RF schools were compared. The result showed that the difference was not significant ( $F(1, 255) = 0.425, p = 0.515$ ).

The 2008 LEAP ELA mean scores of RF schools and non-RF schools were also compared. The Analysis of Variance showed that the effect of the RF program was significant,  $F(1, 334) = 7.383, p = 0.007$ .

The means, the standard deviations, and the effect sizes of the LEAP ELA scores are displayed in Table 4. The LEAP ELA mean scores of the RF schools were higher than that of the non-RF schools for 2006 and 2008. The differences in the mean scores were found to be significant for these years.

**Table 4 The Means of Grade 4 LEAP ELA Scores**

Year	RF schools			Non-RF schools			Hedges' g
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
2006	128	294.74*	56.801	188	276.70	70.512	0.25
2007	115	300.34	49.449	142	295.98	56.265	
2008	138	305.17**	51.965	198	289.06	54.505	0.40

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1 Grade 3 iLEAP ELA

The findings from the current study showed that the third grade RF students' 2008 mean score was higher than that of 2006 (from 288.36 to 305.13), with a difference of 16.77 points. The difference between the mean scores was found to be significant.

Moreover, the findings also indicated that the average achievement level of the third grade RF students was *Basic* (see Appendix A). *Basic* means a student has demonstrated the fundamental knowledge and skills needed for the next level of schooling. To be considered proficient within a subject area on iLEAP, students must achieve a score in the basic, mastery, or advanced achievement levels (Center for Child Development, 2007).

As for the iLEAP ELA scores of the non-RF schools, the results showed that the 2008 mean score was higher than that of 2006 (from 271.93 to 274.06), with a difference of 2.13 points. The difference between the mean scores was not significant. The findings indicated that the third grade non-RF students performed similarly in the iLEAP ELA assessment between 2006 and 2008. The average achievement level of the third grade non-RF schools was *Approaching Basic* (see Appendix A). *Approaching Basic* means a student has only partially demonstrated the fundamental knowledge and skills needed for the next level of schooling.

Figure 1 shows that the iLEAP ELA mean scores of the RF schools were higher than that of the non-RF schools for 2006, 2007, and 2008. The Analysis of Variance showed that the differences in the mean scores were found to be significant for these years as well, favoring the RF schools. The findings of this study indicated that the third grade RF students performed better than the third grade non-RF students in the iLEAP ELA tests for 2006, 2007, and 2008.

In fact, the third grade RF students of the SY 2007-08 were the first group of students who had participated

in all four years of the RF program since the school district received the RF funding in June 2004. It was logical that they would have better performances in *i*LEAP ELA assessment than other students in the previous years.

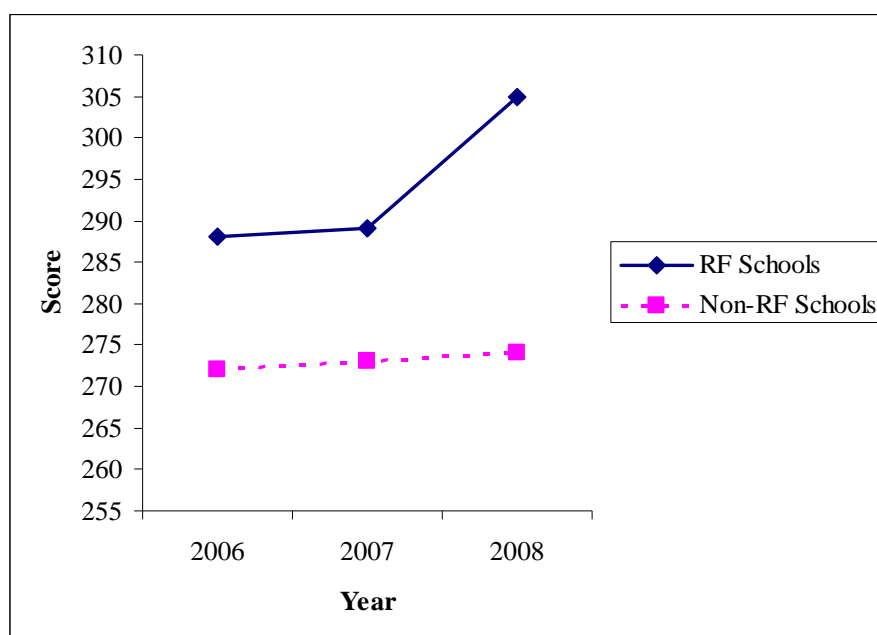


Figure 1 *i*LEAP ELA Mean Scores of RF and Non-RF schools

## 7.2 Grade 4 LEAP ELA

For the Grade 4 LEAP ELA results of the RF schools, the findings of the study showed that the 2008 mean score was higher than that of 2006 (from 294.74 to 305.17), with a difference of 10.43 points. Although the difference was not statistically significant, the average achievement level of the fourth grade RF students had improved from *Approaching Basic* to *Basic* in the LEAP ELA assessment during this period of time (see Appendix B).

As for the LEAP ELA results of the non-RF schools, the findings showed that the 2008 mean score was higher than that of 2006 (from 276.70 to 289.06), with a difference of 12.36 points. Although the difference between the mean scores was found to be significant, the average achievement level of the fourth grade non-RF schools remained *Approaching Basic* in the LEAP ELA assessments between 2006 and 2008 (see Appendix B).

The findings of the study also showed that for the non-RF schools, the 2007 Grade 4 LEAP ELA mean score was higher than that of 2006 (from 276.70 to 295.98), with a difference of 19.28 points. The reading coordinator of the school district stated that the difference in the mean scores might be due to the district-wide training on brain-based learning and Thinking Maps. The school principals held teachers accountable for using the strategies by observing in classrooms. In addition, the district supervisors also conducted routine observations in all schools to ensure the implementation of the strategies in the classrooms.

The data in Figure 2 shows that the Grade 4 ELA mean scores of the RF schools were higher than that of the non-RF schools for 2006, 2007, and 2008. The results of the study showed that the differences in the mean scores for 2006 and 2008 were found to be significant. Even though the fourth grade RF students did not participate for all of the four years in the program, the findings provided strong evidence that the RF students outperformed the non-RF students in the Grade 4 LEAP ELA assessments between 2006 and 2008.

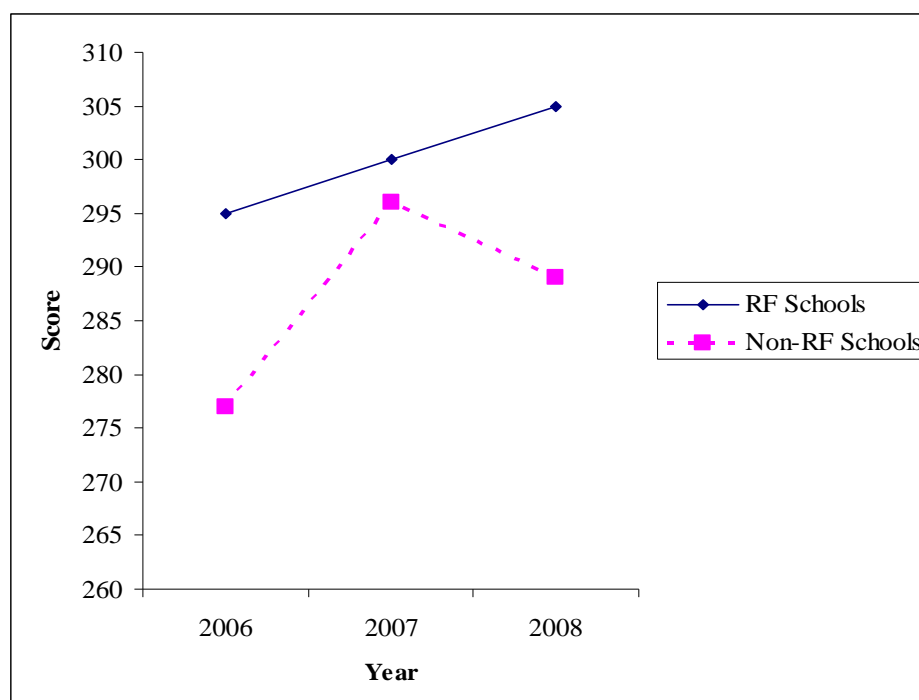


Figure 2 LEAP ELA Mean Scores of RF and Non-RF schools

The findings of this comparative study were consistent with the Nation's Report Card: Reading 2007. The Nation's Report Card informed the public about the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a nationally representative measure of academic achievement of elementary and secondary students in the U.S. The 2007 report stated that fourth-graders in the U.S. scored higher in 2007 than in all the previous assessment years. The average reading score was up 2 points since 2005 and 4 points compared to the first assessment 15 years ago. In addition, there were higher percentages of students performing at or above the *Basic* and *Proficient* achievement levels in 2007 than in previous years (Lee, Grigg and Donahue, 2007).

## 8. Summary and Conclusions

This three-year comparative study was conducted to investigate the effects of the RF program on high-stakes testing by comparing the performance of elementary RF students in the statewide-mandated ELA assessments with those in the non-RF schools. The findings of this study showed that the RF students performed better than the non-RF students in the Louisiana Grade 3 iLEAP ELA and Grade 4 LEAP ELA between 2006 and 2008. The average performance level of the third grade RF students was within the range of *Basic*, whereas the fourth grade RF students had improved from *Approaching Basic* to *Basic*.

However, it is important to note that Louisiana did not have an assessment designated specifically for reading. The state-mandated ELA tests incorporate reading, language, writing, and the use of information sources into one assessment. Nevertheless, reading and writing are related skills. Braunger and Lewis (2006; p. 64) contended, "Reading and writing are reciprocal processes; development of one enhances the other. Research shows that writing leads to improved reading achievement, reading leads to better writing performance, and combined instruction leads to improvements in both areas." Therefore, the current study provided evidence that the RF program had positive impact on the student achievement in the statewide-mandated assessments.

In addition, from a legislature point of view, RF was a federal initiative which disseminated research-based reading instructional strategies into high-poverty, low-performing schools to help improve reading achievement. The findings indicated that the dissemination efforts of the RF program in the rural schools were successful. The researchers support the recommendations made by the Reading First Federal Advisory Committee to the members of Congress and other policy-makers which include: (a) continuing to provide funding for RF, (b) incorporating funding and authority for rigorous evaluations in future legislation, and (c) extending and improving innovative plans that were part of the RF legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2008b).

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**Appendix A**  
*integrated* Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (*i*LEAP)  
**English Language Arts-Grade 3**  
**Achievement Level Scaled Score Range**

Unsatisfactory	Approaching basic	Basic	Mastery	Advanced
100-238	239-281	282-337	338-382	383-500

**Appendix B**  
Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP)  
**Criterion-Referenced Test**  
**English Language Arts-Grade 4**  
**Achievement Level Scaled Score Range**

Unsatisfactory	Approaching basic	Basic	Mastery	Advanced
100-262	263-300	301-353	354-407	408-500