

Evaluation of the Idaho Reading First Intensive Technical Assistance Project

Final Evaluation Report



July 2008
Updated August 2008

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IDAHO READING FIRST
INTENSIVE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECT**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Idaho Reading First Intensive Technical Assistance Project (ITA) was designed to support schools that showed low K-3 reading achievement after several years of participation in Reading First. Based on 2006–2007 data, nine Idaho Reading First schools qualified for ITA and four were randomly chosen to receive weekly visits from state ITA-providers. These providers were charged with helping schools identify their needs and modifying their existing action plans to strengthen Reading First implementation and K-3 reading instruction.

ITA began by February 2008 and lasted until the end of the school year (four to five months). During that time, the four ITA providers made at least 47 visits to the four schools. Each school had a different focus area for their technical assistance; most focused on systemic issues such as the school’s use of data, professional learning teams, or interventions. The ITA providers spent a great deal of their ITA time meeting with the reading coach and/or principal at the school. They also attended grade-level team meetings and observed classroom instruction.

There were several conditions that supported the project. These included:

- All of the ITA schools were voluntary participants.
- ITA was provided within the context of Reading First and used familiar materials and methods such as action planning.
- ITA providers were experienced and skilled and had some opportunities to collaborate with each other.
- There were resources to support the “intensive” nature of the project (47 visits over five months).

From the perspective of the participants, ITA was both useful and effective. They cited accomplishments such as strengthening data use, interventions, and professional teams. One school created an intervention classroom for struggling third-graders, while another reported an increase in the use of student engagement strategies. While providers were happy with these accomplishments, the pace of change was slower than expected. Providers also learned that securing district support for ITA is crucial in future projects.

Despite the positive impressions of ITA, student achievement data did not show consistent associations between ITA and student outcomes across grades K-3. After less than five months of assistance, it was likely too early for any measurable school-wide impact. Results do show a potential association between ITA and improved student outcomes in grade 3.

Overall, principals, coaches, and ITA providers reported positive experiences and believed that ITA had made a difference in their school, even in the short timeframe of implementation. Reading First plans to continue ITA next year in the same four schools, although with less intensity.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Reading First is a federal initiative to strengthen the instruction of reading to primary grade students. Federal funding is provided to states for K–3 reading programs, with the goal of having children read at grade level by the end of third grade. Idaho began implementing Reading First in an initial cohort of schools in 2003–2004; two additional cohorts were added in subsequent years.

Every year, Idaho Reading First state staff members have provided professional development and technical assistance to participating schools. This support has generally included monthly or bimonthly meetings for school principals and reading coaches, and visits to schools for more targeted assistance. Each year, K-3 reading achievement in each school has been tracked with results from the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS).

Reading achievement data from 2006–2007 Reading First schools was examined by the state Reading First project staff members. Schools were categorized into one of four quadrants based on achievement (percentage of students at benchmark) and growth (percentage of students moving to strategic or benchmark over the year). The quadrants were:

- High achievement, high growth schools
- High achievement, low growth schools
- Low achievement, high growth schools

- Low achievement, low growth schools

Nine schools fell into the last quadrant, showing low student growth and low student outcomes in K-3 reading. The Idaho Reading First Executive Committee, which included the director, three state Reading First coordinators, and elected representatives from Reading First schools and districts, agreed to provide four of these nine schools with Intensive Technical Assistance (ITA) during the second half of the 2007–2008 school year. The project, according to the director, was to help schools identify their needs and modify their existing action plans to strengthen Reading First implementation and K-3 reading instruction.

The state randomly assigned four schools to receive ITA starting in late January or early February of 2008. Participation in ITA was voluntary and one of the randomly chosen ITA schools declined to participate because they were already receiving technical assistance from multiple external consultants. Another school was randomly selected to take their place. Thus, of the nine schools in the lowest quadrant, four schools agreed to receive ITA and five schools did not receive ITA. All nine schools remained involved in Reading First and continued to attend state leadership and coaches' meetings and receive the "regular" technical assistance from the state.

Each of the four ITA schools was assigned one ITA provider. These providers included the state Reading First director, two state Reading First coordinators, and a retired principal who had served as a Reading First principal who had some prior experience providing technical assistance. One school had worked with their ITA provider in another capacity; the other

three had only minimal prior contact with their provider. Each provider was to visit the school approximately 10 times before the end of the school year, focusing their technical assistance on strengthening reading instruction and Reading First program components in each school.

Evaluation

Idaho Reading First project staff members requested that the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) conduct an evaluation focused on the following questions:

- What kind of technical assistance was delivered to the ITA schools?
- What was the intensity of the ITA?
- Did K-3 reading instruction change during the period of ITA? If so, how?
- Is there an association between receiving ITA and student outcomes?

The evaluation began in February 2008. The following section details the methods of the evaluation, followed by a description of ITA implementation, student achievement outcomes, and a case study description of one ITA school.

METHODS

To answer the evaluation questions, the evaluation collected both qualitative and quantitative data which are described in this section.

Interviews

All four ITA providers were interviewed by telephone in May 2008. The interview included questions about the content and frequency of ITA, challenges and accomplishments, collaboration with other ITA providers, and their overall impressions.

One ITA school was chosen as a case study school in order to gather more in-depth information about what ITA looked like and how it functioned. At this school, the evaluator conducted in-person interviews with the coach and principal in May 2008. The interview included questions about the content, helpfulness, and perceived impact of ITA on their Reading First grant implementation and K-3 reading instruction.

The three schools that were chosen for ITA but which were not visited for this evaluation were visited as part of the larger evaluation of Reading First. The visit included a question for each principal and coach about the usefulness of ITA.

Interview protocols can be found in Appendix A. Note that no interviews were recorded. Rather, the evaluator took detailed notes. Consequently, quotes in this report are as close to verbatim as possible. Names of schools and individuals are withheld.

Document Review

In addition to interviews, the evaluation included a review of the ITA log summaries from each provider. Some of the summaries had slightly different formats and level of detail, although they all continued the dates and focus of the visits.

Site Visits

The evaluator visited the case-study school at the beginning of ITA provision and again at the end of the school year. The primary purpose of the visits was to observe reading instruction in order to assess if the quality of instruction changed over time.

The first visit (February 12, 2008) included 14 classroom observations and an observation of a grade-level meeting where the ITA provider was present.¹

The second visit was conducted as late in the school year as possible (May 14, 2008), considering school schedules. The visit included 12 classroom observations and the coach and principal interviews. During both visits, the evaluator was given a schedule of all K-3 reading instruction and randomly chose classrooms to observe during the reading block, focus groups (workshop time) and/or interventions. All teachers were informed ahead of time and all allowed the observer into their classroom.

¹ Note that the data from the first visit cannot be considered true “pre” data since technical assistance began a few weeks prior to the visit. However, it was as close to the start of the project as possible and much of the ITA work before the visit had been observing and identifying school needs.

Observations were fairly equally spread out between grades 1-3, however, there were fewer kindergarten interviews because kindergarten was half day. In February, there was a higher proportion of observations during the reading block as compared to focus groups and interventions (Table 1).

The same observer was used for pre- and post-observations. The observer took detailed notes of the classroom activities, including as much teacher and student dialogue as possible.

After the observations, notes were used to complete a two-part protocol. The first part of the protocol recorded descriptive information such as the grade, time, minutes of whole group versus small group instruction, minutes of individual seat work, and the main teacher activity (providing instruction, monitoring student work, administering assessments, or none).

The second part of the protocol called for coding three qualities of instruction important in all Idaho Reading First classrooms:
 1) number of opportunities for students to respond; 2) types of student response (e.g., choral, partner, individual) and;
 3) differentiation of activities during workshop/intervention time.

The protocol was completed by one evaluator for all of the observations. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were run for the pre- and post-data and raw notes were reviewed for details of the findings.

Assessment Data

Two types of student outcome data were collected and analyzed.

(1) Analyses of the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) included change in achievement from winter to spring 2008 in the four schools that received ITA compared with changes in the five schools that did not receive ITA. The overall percentage of students at benchmark, strategic, and intensive in spring 2008 were also examined.

(2) The Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) analyses included looking at change from spring 2007 to spring 2008. Results were again compared between the four ITA schools and the five control schools. However, the comparison was extremely limited because both the ITBS form and norm year changed between the 2007 and 2008 administration.

Table 1.
Observations Conducted During Pre- and Post- Visits

Observations	Pre (February 12, 2008)	Post (May 14, 2008)
Total	14	12
Kindergarten	2	2
Grade 1	3	3
Grade 2	5	3
Grade 3	4	4
Reading Block	10	6
Focus Groups	3	5
Intervention	1	1

There are many limitations to the analyses that can be conducted with these data. Most notably, it is impossible to draw causal links between the achievement results and ITA since the study does not control for other factors that may impact achievement such as demographics, competing school reform initiatives, etc. However, findings can be considered to be part of a larger understanding of the link between ITA and student outcomes.

Analyses were conducted on school level, rather than student level, data. That is, they represent a different group of students in the same grade each year, rather than tracking the same students as they move through different grades.

PROVISION OF INTENSIVE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

This section of the report describes what ITA looked like at the four participating schools and includes a discussion of the challenges and accomplishments of ITA from the perspective of the ITA providers. Data in this section primarily came from interviews with ITA providers and from a review of ITA logs.

Frequency of Visits

The original concept of ITA was to visit each school weekly for about 10 weeks, beginning by February 2008. Although three of the four schools received at least 10 visits, they averaged less than weekly. However, the total number of visits was greater than anticipated; at least 47 visits (231 hours) across the four schools. The number of visits from each provider ranged from seven to 18.² The total number of hours on site was very similar in three schools (about 53 hours each) and more in the case study school (71 hours) which also had the most visits (18).

Establishing Roles and Building Trust

As an outsider, gaining entry to a school requires building relationships, networking, learning the local context, and building ownership in the project (Aldersebaes, Potter, & Hamilton, 2000). Building trust, therefore, is a key skill for outsiders to have in order to gain entry and be effective in a school (Leffler & Hansen, 2005).

To this end, all four ITA providers spent a substantial amount of time learning about the school and building relationships. Each ITA provider conducted at least some of the following activities:

- Meeting with the coach and/or the principal
- Observing classrooms, either alone or with the coach/principal
- Attending some grade-level meetings as an observer, participant, or co-facilitator

Table 2.
Frequency of ITA Visits

	School A	School B	School C	School D
Date of first visit in 2008	January 10	February 4	February 1	January 29
Total number of visits through May	18	11	11	7
Average visits per week	.6	.7	.7	.5
Approximate total number of hours on site	71	54	55	51

Notes: School A is the case study school. Some visit records did not include the number of hours; an average was calculated in these cases. School D had two additional informal dinner meetings.

² Visits between January and mid-May 2008. Additional visits may have occurred late in the school year, after evaluation data collection ended.

During their first visits, each provider had to establish their role in the school. In their own words, they described themselves as “guides,” who were “there to assist,” and to “collaborate” with school staff members. They tried to communicate this perspective with staff members early in the project:

At our first meeting, we worked on our agreement. I was trying to find an entry point without being directive. We needed the ITA to be something collaborative. I was only the guide; the principal and coach were always the ones standing up in front of the staff. (ITA provider)

The role I played was to ask the questions in the right areas and then provide assistance when they came against things or when they didn't know how to explicitly take a certain step. (ITA provider)

Following their vision of collaborative work, most ITA providers said they tried to stay somewhat in the background of the action and make the coach and/or principal be “front and center.” One provider below described scaffolding the learning for coaches and principals rather than taking over himself.

The amount of time it took to build relationships and establish trust was seen as necessary, but also as a frustration to the ITA providers who knew their time at the school was limited. In the example below, the ITA provider visited the school many times before taking action to improve grade-level team meetings.

I think I was happily welcomed in to facilitate a grade-level meeting, but only after I had been to the school seven times; I had to build relationships first. Once we got to a certain place [in our relationship], they let me in. (ITA provider)

Focus of ITA

The director’s vision of ITA was that schools would “self-identify” their problems, rather than having providers tell them what they needed to work on. Following this vision, each school had a different focus that was based on the unique needs of the school. There were, however, slightly varying degrees to which the schools versus the providers identified the focus areas. At two schools, the focus for ITA was clearly identified prior to ITA (e.g., in their action plans) so the provider could begin assisting in those areas immediately.

In the other two schools, the provider worked with them to identify their most pressing needs. For example, during the first meeting at school D, needs arose as the ITA provider guided the coach and principals with questions linked to the Reading First Practices Handbook³.

At first, the principal thought they had already done all of this work, but they were willing to listen. So I started probing with questions from the Handbook. I asked them if their students are able to do X, Y, and Z for example, and after a while, the lights began to click for them. All of a sudden the coach and principal were looking at each other and saying that there was a lot they needed to be doing. (ITA Provider)

As shown in Table 3, each school had two areas that ITA providers focused on; almost all of them were focused on systems-level issues, such as the analyses and use of data or creating professional teams. Strengthening these areas was seen as vital groundwork in the process of improving instruction. Properly analyzing data, for example, was needed before teachers could use that data to plan activities targeted to students’ needs.

³ National Center for Reading First Technical Assistance. Best Practices (Draft). April 2007.

Table 3.
Focus of ITA

	Focus 1	Focus 2
School A	Systems-level data analysis	Interventions and focus groups(materials and grouping)
School B	Improving grade 3 student achievement	Professional teaming
School C	Student engagement strategies	Data analysis for focus group planning
School D	Instructional alignment	Professional teaming

Only one school (C) focused on improving specific instructional strategies, although they also worked on structural issues.

Conditions Supporting ITA

Taken together, data collected for this evaluation suggest that, over the course of ITA, there were several unique conditions that supported the project. First, *ITA was provided within the context of Reading First*. The ITA providers were all very well versed in the vision and implementation details of Reading First so their assistance was aligned with the school’s participation in Reading First. The providers could use materials and processes that the schools were already familiar with such as the Practices Handbook and materials from Reading First trainings. This helped ensure that their assistance did not clash with existing programs or visions. Especially noteworthy was that ITA *used an existing action-planning process* which was a format schools and providers were familiar with from the larger Reading First project.

Third, the *ITA providers were experienced and skilled*. The role of an external technical assistance provider demands a great deal of knowledge and skills.⁴ While the evaluation did not collect data about the specific skills of each provider, their ability to gain entry and trust early in the project and to accomplish the

⁴ Some studies suggest many skills are necessary to be an effective change agent; including skills related to management, needs sensing, facilitative leadership, relationship building, staff development, and providing resources (Miles, Saxl, & Lieberman 1988).

changes discussed in the next section suggest they had many of the skills important for this work. The director described her ITA colleagues as highly qualified:

This is the A-Team of ITA providers. They didn’t need much supervision. They are all so strong and all such reflective practitioners. (Idaho Reading First Director)

Adding to their skills and experience, there were *opportunities for ITA providers to collaborate with each other*, both formally and informally. In fact, several providers said that they wanted more opportunities to collaborate with the other providers because they valued the “power of a team” and the collaboration was a “useful way to share ideas” and to “guide my thinking.”

Another condition that supported the project was that *all the ITA schools were voluntary participants*.⁵ Several providers described their schools as “willing to listen,” and “open” to the work. A few ITA providers encountered some “reluctance,” but no provider said they encountered insurmountable resistance.

This school was so ready to benefit. They were a little bit bitter about the ITA at the beginning, but they were willing to listen to what I could tell them. (ITA provider)

⁵ One of the important dimensions of change recognized in the literature is a continuum of control from voluntary to mandated, with voluntary as the ideal (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977).

Challenges

While most people involved in ITA felt it had been successful, the project was not without its challenges. Like so many of the efforts in schools, progress can move more slowly than expected or desired. The four schools had many things competing for time with ITA, from the day-to-day operations of the school to spring assessments and weather delays. For most of the ITA providers, the slow pace of change was a surprise and a frustration.

I just can't believe how long it takes. It is amazing that you have to make the systemic changes before you can see anything happen in the classroom. It takes so long. (ITA provider)

I waited around a lot [when people were too busy for me]. I would have conversations happen whenever they could; but it wasn't always ideal. (ITA provider)

One principal also said that “time is a killer” because ITA showed the principal so many things that took time to learn. Another principal felt the ITA provider had not been on site a sufficient amount of time.

If they are going to be here, it should be on a weekly basis. It is too easy for time to go by. (Principal)

The time commitment also left some principals and coaches “exhausted.” While they agreed to participate, it was only as an added project on their already-full plates.

Another challenge cited by two ITA providers was working with the district. In these cases, the district either was not supportive or had systems that were difficult to navigate. The project director said that in the future she would like to make sure districts were fully “on board” and signed a formal performance agreement.

Starting mid year was seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, some providers reported that their school was more “ready” for help by the middle of the year. On the other hand, they sometimes battled the tendency for schools to consider April, or even March, too late in the year to begin anything new.

Finally, every ITA provider said that, while they felt confident about their work, there were some areas in which they needed more knowledge or expertise. For example, one ITA provider wanted more skills to help schools deal with resistant teachers while another provider needed to learn more about an assessment tool used by their school. Their request for additional collaboration with other providers might have helped resolve some of these issues.

Accomplishments

Coaches and principals from all four ITA schools were asked about the usefulness of ITA. Almost all interviewees were very positive about their ITA experience and felt it had helped their schools improve their practices.

Additional help from our ITA provider has been the best thing this year; we've received lots of ideas and applications and looked into data in a different way. (Principal)

Our ITA provider had a wealth of information to share and kept us directed in the way we wanted to go. (Coach)

Only one out of the eight interviewed principals and coaches felt that their provider was not particularly helpful because the provider was an “outsider” whose suggestions “weren't always useful.

All of the ITA providers themselves were also enthusiastic about ITA.

It has been one of the best things Reading First has done. I think it benefited the schools and us as ITA providers by forcing us to be in schools and make the issues schools deal with much more front and center in terms of our focus. (ITA provider)

On a scale of 1-10, the usefulness of ITA has been a 10. (ITA provider)

Table 4 below describes the accomplishments of ITA from the perspective of the providers. Most of the accomplishments they described were structural in nature; improving the systems under which Reading First operates. Two accomplishments were more directly linked to immediate changes in instruction: implementing a third-grade replacement core classroom to serve the lowest students and increasing instructional strategies that promote student engagement.

Future of ITA

Based on the positive experiences and usefulness of ITA reported across the schools, Idaho Reading First plans to continue providing the four schools with additional technical assistance next year (2008-2009). However, the frequency and intensity of ITA will likely be scaled back and there is currently no plan to expand ITA to additional schools. The choice to continue ITA is supported by studies that show, especially in high-poverty, low-performing schools, ITA providers must demonstrate a commitment to the site over an extended period of time (Aldersebaes, Potter, & Hamilton, 2000).

It is also important because, as the next section shows, there has not been enough time to impact student achievement as much as is needed in these schools.

**Table 4.
Accomplishments of ITA**

School A	Learned and applied systems-level data analysis	Acquired new instructional materials for focus groups/interventions; began grouping students by their needs
School B	Created third-grade replacement core classroom for lowest students	Improved the effectiveness and efficiency of grade-level meetings
School C	Increased student engagement strategies such as opportunities to respond in class	Improved data analysis with connections to instruction; changed the way data were discussed
School D	Reorganized intervention system to be more aligned with needs shown by data	Reorganized teams and increased their effectiveness

SUMMARY OF STUDENT OUTCOMES

This section includes data from two student assessments: the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) in order to compare the achievement in ITA schools with the achievement in non-ITA schools. While the findings have several limitations, they are strengthened by the random assignment of all nine schools to one of two groups (ITA and non-ITA), as described in the methods section of this report.

The results from both assessments do not show any clear associations between ITA and student outcomes; non-ITA schools outperformed ITA schools in some, but not all cases.

Idaho Reading Indicator

Table 5 shows the spring 2008 Instructional Recommendations (intensive, strategic, benchmark) for ITA and non-ITA schools. The percentage of students at benchmark is slightly higher at non-ITA schools in all four grades. The percentage of students in the intensive group is also slightly lower in non-ITA schools than ITA schools.

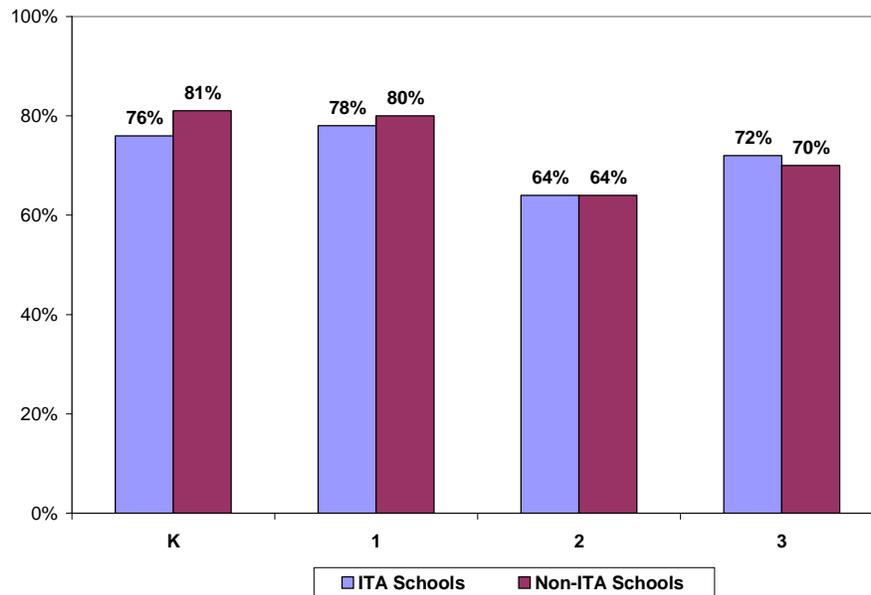
Spring instructional recommendations, however, provide only a “snapshot” of achievement in the spring. To examine what happened over the course of the year, the evaluation looked at adequate growth from fall to spring in the ITA versus non-ITA schools.⁶

Table 5.
IRI Spring 2008 Instructional Recommendations for Schools Eligible for ITA

		N	Percentage of Students		
			Intensive	Strategic	Benchmark
K	ITA Schools	290	5%	19%	76%
	Non-ITA Schools	446	2%	16%	82%
1	ITA Schools	290	6%	17%	78%
	Non-ITA Schools	464	3%	16%	81%
2	ITA Schools	316	17%	23%	60%
	Non-ITA Schools	462	15%	24%	61%
3	ITA Schools	297	17%	24%	59%
	Non-ITA Schools	461	15%	22%	63%

⁶ Adequate growth is defined in kindergarten and grade 1 as intensive students who move to benchmark, strategic students who move to benchmark, benchmark students who remain at benchmark. In grades 2 and 3 it is defined as intensive students who move to strategic or benchmark, strategic students who move to benchmark, benchmark students who remain at benchmark.

Figure 1.



Percentage of All Students Who Made Adequate Growth from Fall 2007 to Spring 2008 in ITA and Non-ITA Schools

Results from this analysis were mixed. When looking at the overall adequate growth of all students, as in Figure 1, results were fairly similar in all grades except kindergarten where non-ITA schools had slightly more success. The figure above does not show the amount of variation in the categories within each grade.

Table 6 below presents the percentage of adequate growth for each group (intensive, strategic, and benchmark). In grades kindergarten and one, non-ITA schools performed similarly or out-performed ITA schools in most cases. In grade 2, ITA schools were more successful at moving their intensive students. And in grade 3 ITA

Table 6.
Percentage of Students Who Made Adequate Growth from Fall 2007 to Spring 2008

	Growth from Intensive	Growth from Strategic	Maintained benchmark	Overall Growth – all students	Overall Growth – at risk students*
Kindergarten					
Non-ITA	61%	81%	91%	81%	71%
ITA	65%	73%	89%	76%	69%
Grade 1					
Non-ITA	39%	75%	96%	80%	65%
ITA	33%	70%	96%	78%	60%
Grade 2					
Non-ITA	23%	25%	90%	64%	24%
ITA	35%	30%	90%	64%	32%
Grade 3					
Non-ITA	40%	39%	95%	70%	39%
ITA	49%	59%	97%	72%	54%

*At risk calculation includes only intensive and strategic students.

schools, growth in strategic students was especially notable. This equated to ITA schools having a higher percentage overall growth for at-risk students in grades 2 and 3.

There was large variation among and within schools.

ITBS

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) has been administered in all Reading First schools each spring since the start of Idaho Reading First. For this evaluation, changes from 2007 to 2008 in the average ITBS normal curve equivalent scores were examined. This comparison was limited by the change in both ITBS form and norm year between 2007 and 2008.

ITBS results did not show stronger outcomes for ITA schools compared with non-ITA schools. ITA schools outperformed non-ITA schools in kindergarten and grade two, but non-ITA schools outperformed ITA schools in grades one and three.

Taken together, the mixed results from the assessment data suggest that there may not have been enough time yet for ITA to impact instruction and student achievement across grades K-3. There may have been some impact in ITA schools in grade 3 and, to a lesser extent, grade 2. It will be important to track the achievement of ITA schools after they have received additional assistance in fall 2008.

A CASE STUDY: INTENSIVE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AT ONE SCHOOL

This section of the report details Intensive Technical Assistance (ITA) in one case study school. Data collected from the ITA school included in-depth interviews with the coach, principal, and ITA provider as well as two full-day visits to the school in which 26 classroom observations were conducted.

CS Elementary

CS Elementary School⁷ is a mid-size elementary school in a district west of Boise, Idaho. Each of the four corridors of the building has brightly-lit classrooms to serve the almost 500 students enrolled in grades K-5. A large proportion of students at this Title I school are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (69%)⁸ and student turnover is high. A growing percentage of CS students are Hispanic (39%) and many are English Language Learners (24%).

The 2007–2008 school year marked CS Elementary’s fifth year in Idaho Reading First. They use Open Court to teach reading during the 90-minute block and all students receive additional reading instruction during focus groups and intervention time. As part of their Reading First grant, the principal said that staff members regularly meet to discuss data and reading instruction.

While CS Elementary has witnessed some successes over their five years in Reading First, student achievement results have not been consistent. In the state’s analysis of 2006–2007 data, CS Elementary fell into the lowest quadrant: low growth and low outcomes. The coach explained,

We haven’t made progress in some grades. Kindergarten has been solid, but last year we had our lowest first grade scores since the beginning of the grant.

When the principal and coach were interviewed for this evaluation, they said that from the beginning they believed ITA was meant to “provide support to get more kids at benchmark” and that it was “not an evaluation but an outside pair of eyes.”

Frequency of ITA

The ITA provider visited the school 18 times over 20 weeks from January to May, 2008. These visits ranged from a few hours to a full day. There was also regular e-mail communication in between visits.

Establishing Roles and Building Trust

The ITA provider at CS Elementary came from outside the school; he had spent only minimal time with the school and its staff members. His “outside” status could have been a difficult obstacle to gaining trust and entry into CS Elementary, especially since the school had not always had positive experiences with external consultants.

However, the coach and principal reported a positive relationship with their ITA provider from the very beginning of the project. During his initial visits to the school, the provider met with the principal and coach and was then introduced to the entire staff at a staff meeting. He also spent time observing in classrooms and at meetings in order to learn about the structures and culture of the school. The principal and coach felt the provider’s personality and participatory approach were a good fit with their school.

⁷ “CS” stands for Case Study school; no actual school names are included in the report.

⁸ All data are from the School Performance Report 2006–2007.

The staff feel really comfortable with him because he's made an effort. The building rapport happened quite naturally because he attended meetings and participated as a team member, rather than someone from afar.
(Coach)

Our ITA provider has the right personality. He is really here to help lift the load and to work to help kids. It isn't at all top-down. It takes people skills to do this work and he does well with that. (Principal)

The principal added that the school was more “ready” for the help at this particular point in time because they had “matured” enough to do the work.

Focus of ITA

The ITA provider said that his initial observations and discussions at CS Elementary pointed to a need to focus on systems-level changes at the school. Specifically, he identified two areas of focus which were clearly linked to one another:

- **School-level data analysis.** While the school was comfortable looking at individual students' data, they rarely used data to look at trends across the school. For example, the school had not uncovered a trend that, across the school, strategic students were remaining in strategic category, suggesting a need for improved focus groups and interventions.
- **Focus groups and interventions.** While CS Elementary offered focus group time and interventions to all students, the ITA provider saw a lack of instruction targeted to specific student needs. In most cases, students were not grouped by their instructional needs as identified by the data and there was some lack of

appropriate materials for those students who needed additional practice in phonics and phonemic awareness.

Very early in the process, the ITA provider had a vision for what he wanted to see happen at the school.

I'd like them to analyze the big picture with their winter data. The grade level teams should see that their comprehensive (core) program is okay but their interventions really need some work. That is where I am going to guide them...to think about materials and practice. (ITA provider, February)

The coach said that they already knew their interventions needed improvement, but the ITA provider helped them take further action.

Before ITA, we already knew something was needed in terms of interventions; we'd discussed it in the past, but we were stalled and didn't really know what to do next. ITA added more structure [to that conversation] and we were able to move a little more directly than we would have by ourselves. (Coach)

The ITA provider described his first few months of work as somewhat “informal.” That is, he would visit the school, observe, and meet with leadership about the focus areas. In April, visits became more formal; the provider circulated agendas and meeting notes, which included specific action items and responsibilities before and after each visit. The ITA provider and school leadership both believed the change to more formal visits helped increase the pace of change.

Like the other ITA schools, there were three main types of activities that took place during visits:

- Meetings with school leadership. Some meetings included the principal, but the coach was the primary contact. One meeting included a member of the district staff and a teacher.
- Observations of instruction during the reading block, focus groups, and interventions.
- Observation and/or participation in grade-level team meetings, first as an observer and later as a co-facilitator and/or participant.

Additionally, one early ITA visit was part of a scheduled Reading First calibration visit where another Reading First school came to observe and provide feedback to CS Elementary regarding their intervention program. According to the ITA provider, this calibration visit fit nicely in the ITA process because the visiting school “identified some of the same problems that we were going to work on.”

Accomplishments

The biggest changes at CS Elementary by May 2008 were structural in nature. As described by the provider, coach, and principal, there was a *shift from a micro to a macro use of data*. The provider said that the coach and principal embraced a “big picture” approach to data analysis and staff members were beginning to do so as well.

I've started to hear the word 'system' among the coach and staff and teachers a lot more and that is big. Instead of talking about individual students all the time, the coach and principal are very aware of talking at a systemic level. I think this was a paradigm shift for them and I

am starting to see it in teachers, too. (ITA provider)

The principal agreed:

We used to have a micro view and our ITA provider has helped us develop a more macro view. We used to look at individual students and he asked us to look at a broader context to make systemic changes. (Principal)

A second change that occurred during ITA was *the purchase of a targeted and explicit program for focus groups and interventions*. The school purchased the SIPPS® program (Systematic Instruction in Phoneme Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) which is expected to be implemented in fall 2008. (During ITA, one CS Elementary teacher began piloting the program and some Title I paraprofessionals began using some SIPPS concepts and routines.)

The third change at CS Elementary was the *implementation of data-based, fluid systems for forming focus groups*. The ITA provider said teachers were using data from the IRI and core phonics survey to place students in groups with similar instructional needs. Each grade-level team worked on grouping together. The next step at CS Elementary will be helping teachers link appropriate activities to each group.

Given that the foci of ITA at CS Elementary were structural in nature, it is not surprising that *there were almost no changes in the qualities of reading instruction*. Two types of data confirmed that little, if anything, changed in terms of instruction from February to May. First, the interviewed coach, principal, and provider stated that the work of ITA was mostly about “laying the groundwork” and that the impact on instruction had been minimal as of May 2008.

Second, there were very few noticeable improvements in the qualities of reading instruction measured during observations in May as compared to February. Many of the measured qualities, such as opportunities to respond or the presence of differentiated activities during focus groups/interventions stayed the same or decreased over time. (Observation data results are detailed in Appendix B.)

The ITA provider, coach, and principal all expected change at the instructional level early next year, especially in focus groups and interventions with the implementation of SIPPS and activities targeted to specific student needs.

Challenges

As in any change process, the ITA project was limited by time. The ITA provider said:

A limitation was how long it took to process things, make decisions, and get things in place. I have been amazed at how slowly it takes to get this stuff done. That has been interesting for me to observe. (ITA Provider)

A lengthy delay over the purchase of an intervention program also impeded progress. Time was needed not only for the garnering of support from all staff members but navigating the purchasing process at the district office, and awaiting shipment from the publisher. When the materials finally arrived, the coach was hesitant to put something new on teachers' plates so late in the year. She believed it was wiser to wait until the following school year:

My thought is that we get the data and programs in place this spring and then...we can talk about how workshop is different next fall. I have kind of waited because we need to get these other things in place. (Coach)

Another challenge was navigating the ITA process at the district level, which the ITA provider described as "difficult." The ITA provider admitted that he had little experience working with districts which would have benefited him in this ITA situation.

Finally, while the principal and coach were positive, overall, about ITA, they noted that it was challenging because it could be very "intensive," leaving them and their staff members "tired at times."

Student Achievement in CS Elementary

In May 2008, the principal and coach at CS Elementary were excited about the outcomes they had seen in 2007–2008.

This year we had our highest third-grade scores ever. We had no negative growth in third-grade this year! That has never happened. (Coach)

Third-grade data was, in fact, the strongest data from CS Elementary. Overall results, however, show that the school still has a long way to go and it may have been premature to expect great changes in student outcomes since the ITA focused mostly on systemic issues.

The spring instructional support recommendations at CS Elementary are shown in Table 7. The percentage of students at benchmark was highest in grades three (65%) and two (61%) and substantially lower in kindergarten (53%) and grade two (43%).

Table 7.
Spring 2008 Instructional Support Recommendations—CS Elementary

	Percentage of Students		
	Intensive	Strategic	Benchmark
Kindergarten	13%	33%	53%
Grade 1	16%	23%	61%
Grade 2	31%	26%	43%
Grade 3	17%	17%	65%

The adequate growth from fall to spring was also examined on the IRI; overall growth was strongest in third grade (76%) which had the highest percentage of growth among all three groups (intensive, strategic, and benchmark). Adequate growth in other grades was not as strong and there was variation among and between grades, as shown in Table 8.

Results from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills at CS Elementary also showed mixed results. The average curve equivalents in grades K–3 were as follows:

- Kindergarten 41.2
- Grade 1 40.0
- Grade 2 36.9
- Grade 3 47.3

As described in the previous section, comparisons over time with ITBS data are limited by the change in ITBS test form and norm year for the 2007–2008 school year.

With this limitation in mind, CS Elementary had mixed results by grade; there were positive gains in the average curve equivalents from 2007 to 2008 in grades one and two, but not in kindergarten or second grade.

There are, of course, many other factors beyond ITA that might help explain these achievement trends. For example, in 2007–2008 all of the third-grade teachers at CS Elementary were either new to the school or new to teaching third grade; the third-grade staff members from previous years chose to leave the school, in some part due to their objections to some Reading First requirements. Moreover, while the overall goal of ITA is to impact student achievement, the months of assistance to CS Elementary in spring 2008 focused on structural, systemic issues which, as data suggest, has not yet reached the classroom level in any substantial way.

Table 8.
Spring 2008 Instructional Support Recommendations—CS Elementary

	Percentage of Students		
	Intensive	Strategic	Benchmark
Kindergarten	13%	33%	53%
Grade 1	16%	23%	61%
Grade 2	31%	26%	43%
Grade 3	17%	17%	65%

Was ITA at CS Elementary “Typical” of The Project?

The ITA at CS Elementary was more similar than different from ITA at the other schools. Similar to most other schools:

- The ITA provider was viewed as a knowledgeable resource and gained trust and entry into the school without major challenges.
- The provider used action planning and materials from the larger Reading First project to guide the work.
- The types of ITA activities were meeting with the coach and principal, observations, attending grade-level team meetings.
- The foci of ITA were structural and systemic in nature.
- The pace of change was slower than expected.
- The principal and coach were positive about the experience.

Slightly different from ITA at the majority of other schools:

- CS Elementary was visited more frequently and the total number of hours on site was higher than the other schools.
- The decision about the focus of ITA was attributed more directly to the ITA provider, rather than a pre-existing focus or something the school was guided to identify themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

To provide Intensive Technical Assistance (ITA) to low-performing Idaho Reading First schools, four Reading First ITA providers made at least 47 visits to four schools selected to receive this additional assistance in 2008. From the perspective of the participants, ITA was both useful and effective. Almost all principals, coaches, and providers reported positive experiences and believed that ITA had made a difference in their school, even in the short timeframe of four to five months. Many of the accomplishments they cited, such as strengthening data use, interventions, and professional teams, were impressive first steps in a longer change process.

Despite these positive impressions, outcome data did not show any clear associations between ITA and student outcomes across grades K-3. After less than five months of assistance, it was likely too early for any measurable school-wide impact. Results do show a potential association between ITA and improved student outcomes in grade 3.

Technical assistance in this project was strengthened because it was provided within, and supported by, a larger initiative (Reading First). This and other lessons learned can be applied to future ITA projects within or outside of Reading First. Many of the lessons below were modeled in the ITA project:

- Allow sufficient amounts of time to gain entry and trust at the start of the project
- Create a reasonable expectation for the pace of change
- Use specific processes and resources such as action plans
- Recruit skilled providers who have deep knowledge of the project and a common vision for their work

- Provide ample opportunities for providers to collaborate with one another
- When possible, allow voluntary school participation and adopt a collaborative model
- Ensure that the district, not just the school, is supportive of the work
- Provide enough resources to support the “intensive” aspect of ITA, making sure the intensity of the commitment is understood by both providers and schools

Future ITA projects should keep these lessons in mind since, without these and other supports, the process and pace of work in this project could have been much different.

Although schools and the ITA providers can celebrate their accomplishments, there is still much work to be done. The director of Idaho Reading First already recognized that the timeframe (four to five months) was not a sufficient amount of time to meet the needs of the students in these schools. The project will continue in fall 2008, although with less intensity.

In addition to continuing to examine student achievement outcomes, any future evaluation of ITA might consider collecting data from more voices within the schools (e.g., teachers), requiring more systematic documentation from ITA providers, and employ other methods for measuring structural and instructional changes.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Idaho Reading First Intensive Technical Assistance Study
Interview Protocols

**Idaho Reading First
Intensive Technical Assistance Study
Interview Questions**

Phone Interview for ITA Providers

In addition to the interview, ITA providers should submit any documentation of their work with the school.

Background

- Why was this school chosen to receive ITA?
- What was your relationship with the school, if any, prior to the ITA?
- How/why were you assigned to this school?

Frequency/Intensity of TA

- When did the ITA start? (date)
- How many times have you visited between that date and today?
- Besides visiting, how often have you communicated with the school (e.g., via e-mail/phone)?

Content of TA

- What was the focus and/or goal(s) of the ITA?
- Why was that focus (and/or goals) chosen? Who chose it? How?
- Please describe how you have worked with the school over the past several months. Provide specific examples of what your work “looked like.”

Outcomes, Successes, and Challenges

- What changes have you seen in the school over the period of ITA? (e.g., school structures, materials, staffing).
- What about instruction? If you were to analyze my observation notes from February and May, what changes in practices, or qualities of practices, would you expect to see? Please be specific.
- What aspects of the ITA helped bring about the above change(s)?
- What were the limitations of the ITA?
- Where does the school need to focus next?
- Does the school need continued ITA?

Your role as ITA provider

- What expertise did you bring to the school that was most helpful?
- Were there areas where you felt you did not have enough knowledge/skills to provide adequate ITA? How did you deal with this?

- Tell me a little bit about how you collaborated with the other ITA providers from the state. What was most and least helpful about this collaboration?

Overall

- How would you change the nature (e.g., structure/content/timing) of ITA in the future?
- Overall, how would you rate the usefulness of ITA?
- Anything else you'd like to tell me?

The project director will also be asked about the overall vision of the ITA project.

In-person Interview
Case Study School Coach and Principal

Background

- a) Tell me a little bit about your involvement in Reading First since the beginning of the grant. What have been the biggest successes and challenges?
- b) Why was your school chosen to receive ITA?
- c) What is your current understanding of the purpose/goal of ITA? Has that understanding changed since ITA began?

Frequency

- d) About how frequently did you, personally, see your ITA provider?
- e) How often did you communicate with him when he was not on site?
- f) Did the ITA provider ever work directly with other people in the building besides the coach and principal? How? How would you describe the relationship (tone/feeling) between the ITA provider and the staff?
- g) Was the frequency of contact with your ITA provider adequate for you personally? For the school as a whole?

Content of ITA

- h) How did your ITA provider choose what to focus on at your school?
- i) How did your ITA provider deliver technical assistance? Provide at least one specific example of a visit and follow-up.
- j) What was most helpful about ITA?
- k) What was least helpful about ITA?

Outcomes

- l) What has changed as a result of the ITA? (in school structures, materials, staffing, etc.)
- m) How much is ITA responsible for any of the changes you just mentioned? How do you know?

- n) What about instruction? If you were to analyze my observation notes from February and again from today, what changes in practices, or qualities of practices, would you expect to see? Please be specific.

Overall

- o) How would you change the nature (e.g., structure/content/timing) of ITA in the future?
- p) Overall, how would you rate the usefulness of ITA?
- q) Looking to the future, what role would you like the state to play at your school? What do you most need?
- r) Anything else you'd like to tell me?

APPENDIX B

CS Elementary Classroom Observations

Appendix B

CS Elementary Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted on February 12, 2008 and again on May 14, 2008 as described in the methods section. This document details the findings from the observations based on the observation protocol developed for this project.

In terms of the qualities measured by the protocol:

- The average number of opportunities to respond orally per student stayed about the same. The opportunities to respond during focus groups/interventions were much lower than during the reading block.

Average Number of Opportunities to Respond Per Student		
	Pre	Post
All Observations	18	19
Reading block	64	22
Focus groups and interventions	10	8

- The percentage of time the teacher was providing instruction (rather than monitoring or assessing students) decreased overall.

Percentage of Time the Teacher Provided Instruction*		
	Pre	Post
All Observations	67%	56%
Reading block	80%	100%
Focus groups and interventions	40%	30%

*Rather than monitoring seat work or assessing students

- There was no change in the frequency of differentiating activities during focus groups/intervention. That is, no classrooms assigned different “must do” or “next do” activities based on students’ needs, although some classrooms allowed students to work at their own pace.
- There was almost no change in the presence of choral and partner response options (rather than only individual responses)

Percentage of Classrooms where Response Type was Present		
	Pre	Post
Choral Response	64%	67%
Partner Response	21%	25%
Individual Response	86%	75%

- There was almost no change in the occurrence of small-group instruction; across all observations, only one teacher worked with a small group⁹; the vast majority (96%) of instruction was either whole-group instruction or monitoring students as they completed desk work.

⁹ Two additional classes who used a replacement core had a total of six or fewer students, but these were coded as whole-group instruction since the instructor was teaching the entire group.