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An Evaluation of the Secondary Reading Initiative

Year Two Student Effects

The Houston Independent School District first implemented the Secondary Reading Initiative (SRI) during the 2012-2013 school year. The primary objective of the Initiative is to increase achievement, in terms of STAAR test-score gains, for secondary-school students who have struggled with reading. To achieve this goal, the District has applied a "double dosage" policy, where students scoring below predetermined STAAR and Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) thresholds were required to enroll in a reading remediation course in addition to their regularly-schedule English and language arts classes. These remediation courses occur during regular school hours and take the place of electives (e.g., art, music, physical education, etc.). The District has subsidized and provided incentives for teachers who instruct these reading remediation courses.

There were two substantial changes to the implementation of SRI in its second year. As planned, the District expanded the targeted grades. In its first year, SRI was provided at the 6th and 9th grade levels; 7th grade was included in year two (2013-2014) and 8th grade in year three (2014-2015). The other major change to SRI in year two was a lowering of the SAT-eligibility criterion. In order to qualify for SRI, students originally needed to score below the 50th percentile on the SAT reading test. The cut level for the SAT was decreased from the 50th to the 40th percentile in year two, making it such that a smaller proportion of students would ultimately qualify for the intervention.

Several analytical strategies were applied for this evaluation to assess SRI's effectiveness in year two. A basic examination of scale-score differences suggests that SRI students made gains in terms of their STAAR reading achievement. However, non-SRI as well as

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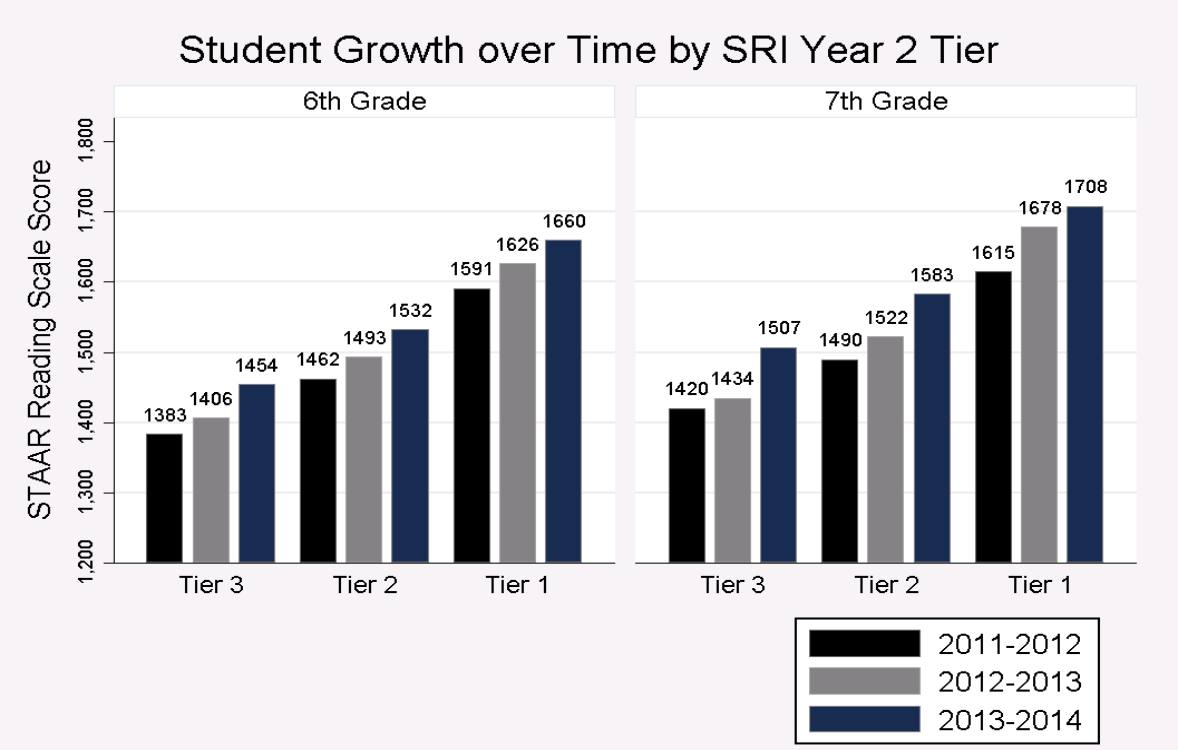

Note: Tier I students were those ineligible for SRI; Tier II were those eligible for SRI and scoring between the 20th and 40th percentiles on the SAT; and Tier III were those students scoring at or below the 20th percentile. Ninth grade students were excluded from this graph due to their 2013-2014 test being the English I STAAR EOC, which is on a different scale than the 2013-2014 STAAR Reading assessment.

pre-SRI students also experienced significant STAAR reading scale-score gains (see graph above). Therefore, descriptive assessments of SRI student performance fail to adequately assess the extent to which these gains can be attributed to having received the SRI treatment.

The primary analytical approach for this evaluation attempts to examine the causal impact that SRI had on student achievement by focusing on a comparison of reading test-score gains for students scoring near the SRI-eligibility threshold. In other words, with the sharp, predetermined decision rules used for assigning student eligibility, students narrowly at the margin of this threshold were very similar in many ways, including their baseline reading levels, and plausibly only differed in terms of whether or not they received the SRI initiative. This approach closely approximates a natural experiment, making it possible to examine the extent to which SRI contributed to test-score gains for those narrowly eligible for the intervention.

Key Findings

- Based on rigorous analyses, SRI does not appear to have been effective with Tier II-level (i.e., marginally-eligible) students.
- However, there is evidence to

suggest that lower-performing, Tier III-level students made relatively more-substantial reading gains in 2013-2014. These gains could be attributable to SRI, but this relationship cannot be examined given the circumstances of this evaluation.

- The estimated effects of this evaluation are restricted to those students scoring near the SRI-eligibility threshold and cannot necessarily be extrapolated to other students (i.e., higher-achieving Tier I or lower-achieving Tier III students).
- These effects are consistent across various analytical strategies and specifications, making it less likely that the findings are sensitive to a particular method.
- The estimated treatment effects should be defined as the impact of being assigned to remediation in exchange for an elective (e.g., art, music, etc.). In other words, students who were enrolled in SRI could have lost out on benefits that occur from participating in regular electives, potentially offsetting observed SRI effects.
- There was a noncompliance rate of 22 percent (i.e., for 22 percent of students, enrollment was the opposite of SRI-eligibility status – either eligible and not enrolled or ineligible and enrolled).

Suggestions

- Consider restricting the treatment to only Tier III-eligible students. Descriptive evidence suggests the intervention could be more effective with these students. This restriction would also provide the opportunity to more rigorously examine causal effects with these lower-achieving, Tier III students.
- Similarly, consider adjusting assessment eligibility cutpoints to make them more comparable. Students scoring near the STAAR-eligibility threshold were, on average, scoring between the 20th and 25th percentile on the SAT. If using both tests to determine eligibility is intended to increase precision for identifying students in need of the intervention, then either the STAAR cut should be increased or the SAT cut decreased. Lowering the SAT cut to the 20th to 25th percentile is recommended given the key findings and prior suggestion.
- Going forward, consider collecting fidelity measures in order to assess the extent to which fidelity of implementation influences outcomes (e.g., classroom observations with evaluation rubrics) ▪

The Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC)
Kinder Institute for Urban Research
Rice University

The Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research partnership between Rice University and the Houston Independent School District (HISD), the largest district in Texas and the seventh largest in the United States. HERC brings together education researchers and education decision makers to work to ensure that all children have access to a high quality education, regardless of their economic status or where they live. HERC's research agenda is informed by the needs of local education leaders, and the decisions of these leaders are informed by the research produced by HERC and its affiliates. HERC is a program of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research.

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