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Schools: Reading reforms working Nationwide report questions effectiveness of No Child Left Behind component, but area educators keen on program

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Amidst a newly released report that questions the effectiveness of the **Reading First** Program, the state begs to differ – and that includes Bowling Green City and Warren County school systems, both of which have seen an increase in reading proficiency.

The preliminary findings from the **Reading First** Impact Study, issued by the U.S. Department of Education, stated the program was not having a “significant impact on student achievement.”

But Vicki Writsel, associate superintendent for city schools, said there has been significant growth and that the **Reading First** program has been a big component of that growth.

The program, part of President Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act – an effort to transform education nationwide – focuses on professional development for teachers’ programs to help kindergartners through third-graders read fluently. Studies have showed that if a student is not a competent reader by third grade, it will be difficult for him or her to become a competent reader later, Writsel said.

“The strategies and professional development teachers received through this program has made a difference at Parker-Bennett-Curry Elementary School,” she said. “The key is focusing on each individual child’s needs and modifying those if needed.”

Qualifying factors for the program included being a low-performing school, which at the time Parker-Bennett and L.C. Curry elementary schools – later consolidated to make Parker-Bennett-Curry – were. Before combining the two schools, the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System index at Parker-Bennett for reading was at 56.9, and L.C. Curry wasn’t far behind, Writsel said.

The **Reading First** program was based on a study of what effective readers do well, Writsel said. She said under the program, students at the elementary school receive 90 minutes of core reading instruction every day, and if children are below benchmarks on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills test and the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation – two assessments to monitor reading growth – an additional 30 minutes are given. The students also work on strategies, such as knowing how to look for keywords in text they read.

In addition to DIBELS and GRADE, students also do ThinkLink, another assessment that scores like CATS – novice, apprentice, proficient and novice – and focuses on comprehension and foundations of reading. Writsel said constant assessments helps meet the individual learning needs of the students.

“The strength of the program is on the data we collect on a continuous basis to adjust instruction in a timely manner,” she said. “If you consistently study the impact of instruction and change things to meet students needs, you can’t go wrong.”

Parker-Bennett-Curry Elementary’s 2006-07 CATS index was 85.5.

A score of 80 percent on CATS is considered the standard “top,” said Molly Wilson, director of federal programs for county schools.

For Cumberland Trace Elementary School, the index score for 2007 was 101.69, and 88.8 for Warren Elementary School. At the onset of the grant, Cumberland Trace had an index of 77 and Warren Elementary had a score of 73.5. Both schools had more than 50 percent of their children reading below proficiency in the fourth-grade, Wilson said, which qualified them for the grant.

The two schools also use DIBELS and GRADE to assess the students’ reading proficiency throughout the year.

“We’re looking at data and it shows that the students are progressively growing proficient in their reading skills,” Wilson said.

The Collaborative Center for Literacy Development, which is housed in the University of Kentucky College of Education, reported the opposite of the U.S. Department of Education’s study. The center’s research

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