

Did the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Grant Program Reach Its Goals?

An Implementation Report

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Did the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Grant Program Reach Its Goals?

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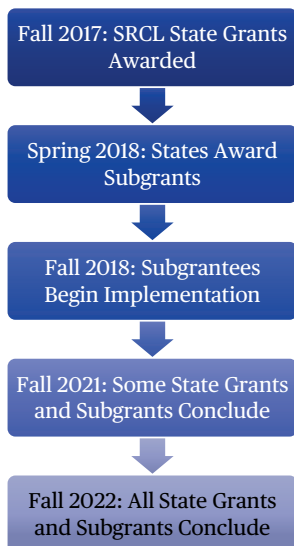
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Boosting literacy among school-age children remains a national priority. Nearly one third of students in the United States have not developed the foundational reading skills needed to succeed academically, with students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and English learners especially at risk. Starting in 2010, Congress invested more than \$1 billion for state literacy improvement efforts through the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL) program. SRCL was intended to focus funding on disadvantaged schools, encourage schools to use evidence-based practices, and support schools and teachers in providing comprehensive literacy instruction. These efforts were expected to lead to improved literacy outcomes for students. This study assesses how well SRCL implementation was aligned with these goals, using information collected from states, districts, and schools in all 11 states awarded grants in 2017.

Key Findings

- ***Uneven targeting of resources to disadvantaged schools, according to the study’s definition of disadvantage, suggests that SRCL’s funding objectives were not realized in every state, though limited data availability and variation in states’ definitions of disadvantage make it difficult to draw firm conclusions.*** Not all states consistently funded the most disadvantaged schools in their states in terms of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, students with disabilities, students who are English learners, or average student English language arts scores.
- ***Literacy programs supported by rigorous research evidence were not a focus, according to independent reviews of the quality of the research. Few districts used SRCL funds to purchase such programs and few teachers in SRCL schools reported using such programs.***
- ***The kinds of comprehensive literacy instruction consistent with research and emphasized by SRCL were less widely used by teachers than intended.*** Consistent with this finding, there was no difference in English language arts student achievement between SRCL schools and comparable non-SRCL schools.

Many U.S. students still do not acquire basic literacy skills, and students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and English learners are especially at risk. Achievement gaps between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers emerge in the early elementary grades and persist through 12th grade.¹ In 2019,



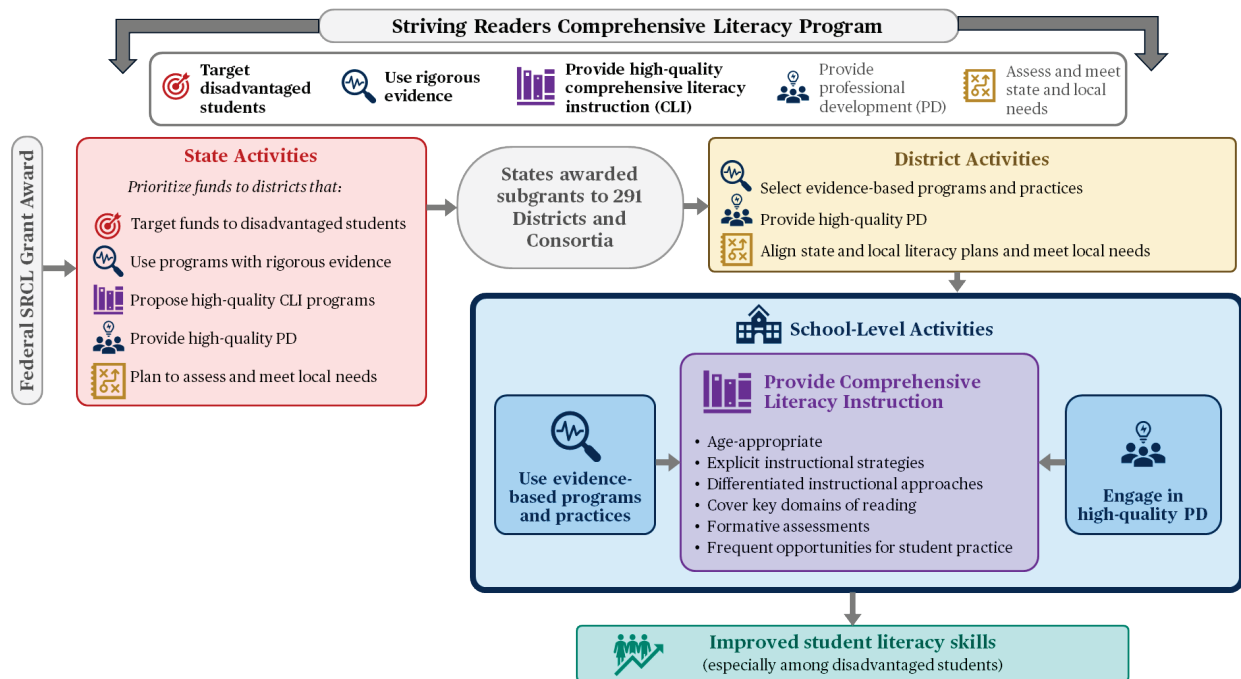
according to findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), just 21 percent of fourth-grade students from low-income families read on grade level, which is 30 percentage points lower than their peers not living in poverty.² Similar differences in achievement are evident in eighth grade, between students with disabilities and nondisabled students and between English learners and their English-proficient peers.³

To help improve literacy skills for children from birth through grade 12, Congress began funding the SRCL program in 2010.⁴ Over the lifetime of the program, the U.S. Department of Education has awarded SRCL grants to a total of 14 states through two competitions.⁵ The average state grant amount in the 2011 cohort was \$130 million, while the average state award in 2017 was \$33 million.⁶ The grant period for the 2011 grants was 5 years; while the 2017 grants initially provided

3 years of literacy support, all states received extensions. Each state was expected to hold a competition to award funds to at least some districts, which would in turn distribute funds to the schools identified in their subgrant applications. SRCL-funded states, districts, and schools were expected to prioritize and carry out particular activities, which shifted somewhat between the 2011 and 2017 rounds of grants.⁷ Exhibit 1 highlights the goals and expectations for the set of 11 states awarded grants in the final round in 2017. Specifically, SRCL funds were intended to improve literacy skills particularly for disadvantaged students. The program emphasized professional development and high-quality instruction supported by evidence. The program also stressed aligning instructional programs and practices to local needs, allowing for significant flexibility in approaches across states.

Congress mandated an evaluation of the program, which is described in this report. The evaluation focused on the 2017 grantees⁸ and assessed the extent to which implementation of SRCL reflected the program’s goals for targeting, evidence use, and instructional quality (these appear in bold text in the top row of the exhibit below). The evaluation was also intended to inform future federal efforts to improve literacy instruction, such as the Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) grant program authorized under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The study and its design are described in Box 1; more information about the grants and subgrants is provided in Appendix A.

Exhibit 1. Key goals and activities of 2017 SRCL grants



Box 1. Summary of the study design

What data were collected?⁹

- **District surveys.** The district staff responsible for SRCL implementation in 389 of all 435 districts receiving SRCL funds (89 percent) responded to the survey about their uses of SRCL funds in 2018-19.
- **School leader surveys.** School leaders, mostly principals, in 449 of 506 sampled schools (89 percent) responded to the survey about their approach to SRCL in 2018-19.¹⁰
- **Teacher surveys.** In 2018-19, 2,404 teachers in sampled schools responded (response rate of 85 percent) to the teacher survey. In 2019-20, 2,831 teachers responded for a response rate of 98 percent.
- **State director interviews.** All 11 state grant directors were interviewed and provided documents.
- **Evidence reviews.** Evidence ratings were drawn from the U.S. Department of Education’s [What Works Clearinghouse \(WWC\)](#)¹¹ and [Evidence for ESSA](#)¹² databases.¹³
- **Existing administrative data.**
 - **School demographics and prior achievement.** The 2018-19 Common Core of Data provided information on percentages of students in each school by race, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, disability, and English learner status. Average English language arts (ELA) state achievement scores by school for 2008-09 through 2015-16 came from the Stanford Education Data Archive.
 - **Student data.** Student demographics and state achievement scores in 2014-15 through 2018-19 came from state administrative data sets in nine states. In two states, aggregated data on student test scores by school, year, grade, and subgroup were retrieved from state websites.
 - **School and district SRCL funding status.** States provided a list of their SRCL districts and schools.

How were data analyzed?¹⁴

- **Targeting disadvantaged schools.** Because states’ definitions of disadvantage varied, a common metric was used to allow state comparisons. Schools were classified as disadvantaged if they ranked in the most disadvantaged quartile in their state on one or more of the following: the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, percentage of English learners, percentage of students with disabilities, or average ELA test scores. “Substantial targeting” means the difference between the percentage of disadvantaged SRCL and non-SRCL schools in a state is at least 15 percentage points.
- **Use of programs supported by strong or moderate evidence.** The three study metrics are (1) the percentage of programs newly purchased with SRCL funds supported by strong or moderate evidence, counting each distinct program once; (2) the percentage of districts’ program purchases supported by strong or moderate evidence, counting each program as many times as the number of districts that purchased it; and (3) the percentage of teachers reporting use of at least one program (SRCL funded or not) supported by strong or moderate evidence.
- **Comprehensive literacy instruction.** Study-set benchmarks for six features of comprehensive literacy instruction (see Box 3) were used to assess teacher practices. Based on survey data, teachers met the benchmarks if they reported engaging in relevant practices often or always, for a substantial portion of the school year, or if they made use of many of the practices.¹⁵
- **Student achievement trends.** Each SRCL school was matched to one or more demographically similar non-SRCL schools to compare trends in ELA achievement before and after SRCL.

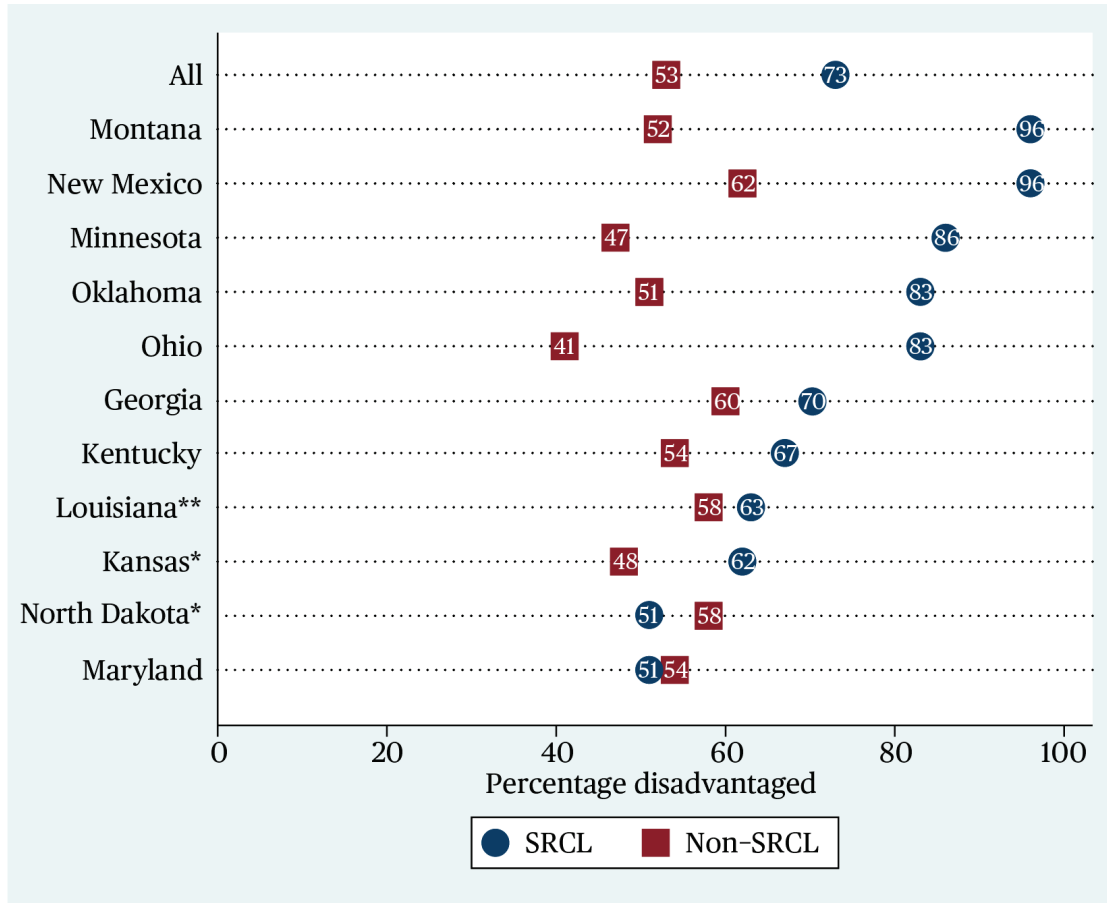
GOAL OF TARGETING FUNDING WAS NOT FULLY ACHIEVED

Improving the language and literacy development of disadvantaged students is essential to their long-term academic and career success. Only about one third of fourth- and eighth-grade students demonstrated competency in reading skills on a national assessment in 2019.¹⁶ Furthermore, disproportionately large numbers of disadvantaged students struggle to develop the necessary literacy skills needed to read, comprehend, and use language effectively.¹⁷ These gaps in achievement between disadvantaged students and their peers appear as early as kindergarten entry¹⁸ and often persist through later grades. High-quality comprehensive literacy instruction and evidence-based curricula can be especially helpful for disadvantaged students to reach their full potential in reading.¹⁹

Thus, the SRCL program aimed to target high-quality instruction to disadvantaged students. Consistent with the goal of reaching disadvantaged students, states received higher scores on their federal grant applications if they had developed criteria for targeting funds to disadvantaged schools. If awarded a SRCL grant, states were then expected to apply these targeting criteria when determining which districts to fund. In some states, eligibility for SRCL subgrants was restricted to districts whose proportions of disadvantaged students met specific thresholds. Other states did not restrict eligibility to districts with a certain proportion of disadvantaged students, but instead gave additional points in the application process to districts that planned to fund more disadvantaged schools. The program's definition of a disadvantaged student was broad,²⁰ so states had flexibility in determining their criteria for disadvantaged schools. The most common types of students included in states' definitions of disadvantaged schools were students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, English learners, students with disabilities, and students reading below grade level. These types of students were specifically called out in the program's definition and are also student characteristics for which the study could calculate school measures with publicly available data.²¹

- ***On average, SRCL schools were relatively disadvantaged.*** To successfully target the most disadvantaged schools, it is necessary for states to direct funds toward a subset of schools, rather than distributing funds broadly. The selection criteria for the federal grant competition incentivized state targeting; accordingly, only one state, Maryland, funded more than one quarter of its schools (see Appendix Exhibit A.2). Across the four types of disadvantage that states most commonly considered, 73 percent of SRCL schools ranked in the most disadvantaged quartile in their state on at least one type; in contrast, 53 percent of non-SRCL schools in SRCL states were disadvantaged on at least one of the four types (Exhibit 2). The 20-percentage-point difference in disadvantage between SRCL and non-SRCL schools across all states suggests substantial targeting to high-need schools overall, since the difference exceeds the study's 15-percentage-point threshold for substantial targeting.

Exhibit 2. Percentage of SRCL and non-SRCL schools that were disadvantaged, overall and by state



Note: A school is counted as disadvantaged if it is among the lowest scoring 25 percent of schools in its state on average English scores from the 2015-16 Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA), or if it is among the highest 25 percent of schools in its state in its percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, English learners, or students with disabilities. Schools missing data on any of the four indicators (average English scores, percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, percentage of English learners, or percentage of students with disabilities) are excluded from the analyses. Kansas and North Dakota (*) exhibit substantial targeting when schools with missing data on one or more indicators are included; Louisiana (**) exhibits negative targeting when schools with missing data are included. Appendix Exhibit C.4a provides analysis results for all states when schools with missing data are included.

Source: 2018-19 Common Core of Data, 2015-16 SEDA, and state education agency lists of SRCL-funded schools.

- However, SRCL funds were not consistently targeted toward the schools serving the largest percentages of students traditionally considered to be disadvantaged in each state.** Although there was substantial targeting of funds when combining across all states, targeting was not uniform across states. In five states, the difference between the percentage of SRCL and non-SRCL schools that were disadvantaged according to the study’s definition indicated substantial targeting (Exhibit 2). In four states, the percentage of SRCL schools that were disadvantaged was higher than the percentage for non-SRCL schools, but by less than the study’s definition of substantial targeting. The remaining two SRCL states, Maryland and North Dakota, did not target SRCL funds to schools that were disadvantaged according to the study’s definition; in those two states, a higher percentage of nonfunded schools than funded schools met the study’s definition of disadvantaged. Maryland funded 73 percent of the state’s schools, limiting the potential to target. North Dakota incorporated other measures of disadvantage, including Native American students, homeless

students, and students with a parent formerly incarcerated, so the state may have distributed funds to schools that served very disadvantaged students but just not students with the characteristics used in the study's definition.^{22,23}

In some cases, states' thresholds for considering a school disadvantaged were less stringent than the thresholds used in the study; see Appendix Exhibit A.16 for a table of states' definitions of disadvantage. For instance, Kentucky required a lower percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch for a school to be considered disadvantaged than the study did. Kentucky achieved some targeting but not substantial targeting according to the study's measures, but achieved substantial targeting when evaluated according to its own criteria, as shown in Appendix Exhibit C.5. However, for most states, the study-defined thresholds and states' own criteria generate similar conclusions about targeting.

- ***While all states included some priority for disadvantaged schools in judging subgrant applications, an intended emphasis on targeting did not ensure that SRCL funds reached the most disadvantaged schools.*** According to program documents and interviews with state grant directors, six of the 11 SRCL states included some measure of disadvantage as a subgrant eligibility requirement. In these states, only districts proposing to fund schools that met a specified threshold for disadvantage were eligible to receive subgrants. For example, Louisiana proposed to consider applications only from districts enrolling at least 50 percent students who were economically disadvantaged, English learners, students with disabilities, migrants, and/or in foster care. In Kansas, districts were expected to meet or exceed the statewide median percentage of English learners, students with disabilities, and/or students from economically disadvantaged households.²⁴ All five of the SRCL states that did not use disadvantage as a subgrant eligibility requirement did include targeting as a competitive priority, however, meaning that applicants serving more disadvantaged students would receive higher scores on their subgrant applications. Nonetheless, some states that placed a heavy emphasis on targeting in the subgrant competition did not achieve it, at least based on the study's definition.²⁵

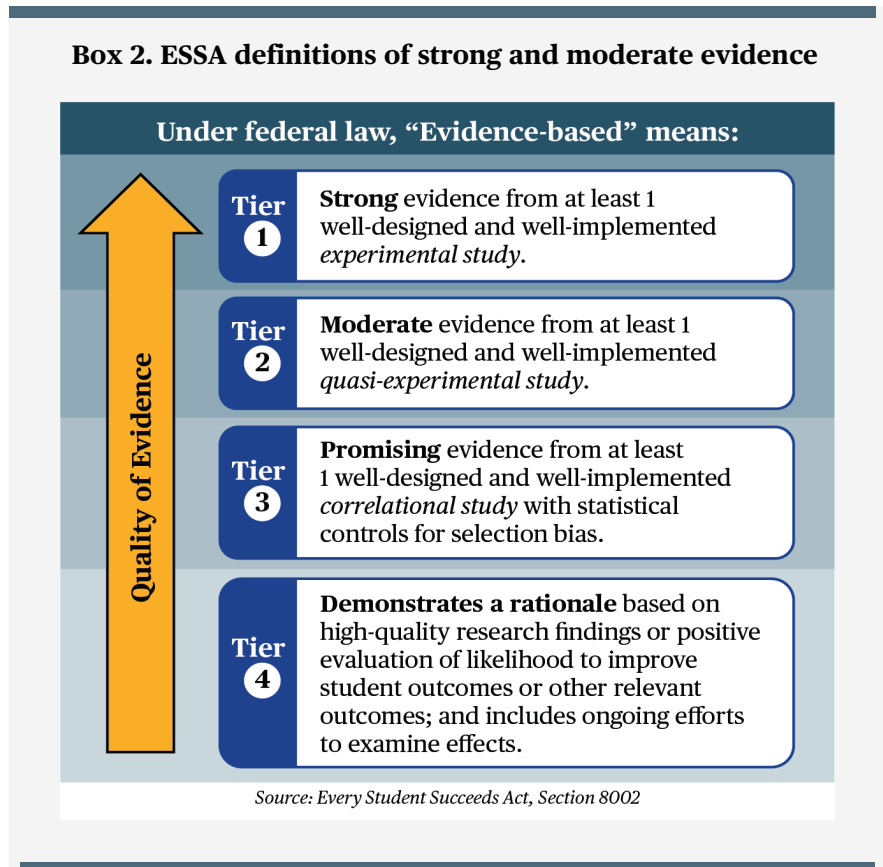
LESS FOCUS ON LITERACY PROGRAMS WITH RIGOROUS EVIDENCE THAN EXPECTED

Federal education policy has placed increasing emphasis on expanding the use of educational strategies supported by evidence, in an effort to improve student learning and close achievement gaps. Such policies are grounded in the assumption that there is insufficient use of evidence-based programs and that “proven” programs are more likely than those without evidence to improve student and school outcomes. Reading instructional programs, in particular, have long been evaluated for their effectiveness using rigorous research methods and constitute the largest body of evidence in the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) for educators to find and adopt. Policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels have renewed efforts to increase the use of research-based strategies for improving student reading and to provide educators professional development on effective practices,²⁶ in the face of persistently low levels of reading proficiency.

Given the large evidence base on literacy programs, the Department aimed for rigorous evidence to play a central role in the selection of SRCL activities. SRCL required each state to prioritize funding to districts that had a plan to include interventions and practices supported by strong or moderate research evidence, as defined by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA); see Box 2. SRCL required states to ask a panel of external, objective experts to assess the evidence supporting activities proposed by districts. The Department also incentivized

states to provide technical assistance to districts about selecting activities meeting the evidence criteria through additional points on state applications. Because the ESSA definitions of strong and moderate evidence are largely aligned to the standards used by the WWC and Evidence for ESSA, state officials and their independent panel of experts could have referenced either clearinghouse to confirm the strength of evidence for the programs districts proposed in addition to or in lieu of any evidence reviews the state conducted. The study focused on the quality of evidence for literacy programs purchased with SRCL funds because reviews of other types of purchases (for example, professional development) are less frequently available in the WWC.

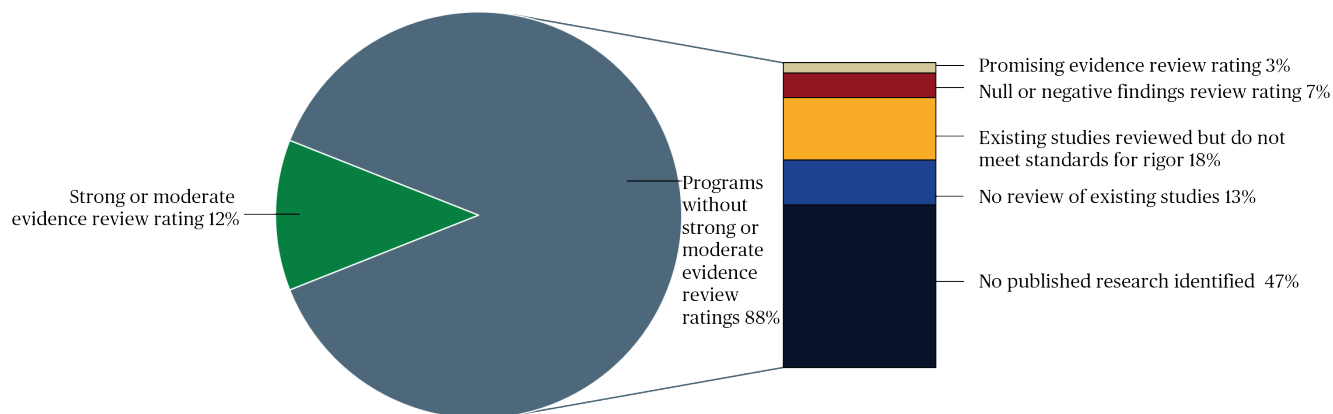
- One of the primary ways districts used their SRCL funds was to purchase literacy programs.** Most SRCL districts (82 percent) purchased a core curriculum to be used as the basis of regular classroom instruction or a supplemental literacy program used with struggling readers. Moreover, nearly two thirds of SRCL districts (64 percent) ranked the purchase of a literacy program as one of their top three uses of SRCL funds. Other frequent purchases with SRCL funds included literacy-related professional development (84 percent of SRCL districts), books unrelated to a specific curriculum (64 percent), or parent engagement activities (50 percent; see Appendix Exhibit A.3).



SRCL districts purchased 236 different literacy programs²⁷ with SRCL funds. A few of the 236 literacy programs were purchased by a large number of districts—26 percent of SRCL districts purchased at least one of the three most common programs. However, half of the programs were purchased by just one district each (see Appendix Exhibit C.10).

- However, SRCL funds were not commonly used by districts to purchase curricula supported by strong or moderate evidence.** Of the 236 programs purchased with SRCL funds, only 12 percent had a strong or moderate evidence review rating (Exhibit 3).²⁸ No published research could be identified for almost half of the programs purchased with SRCL funds.

Exhibit 3. Percentage of literacy programs purchased with SRCL funds, by strength of evidence, 2018-19



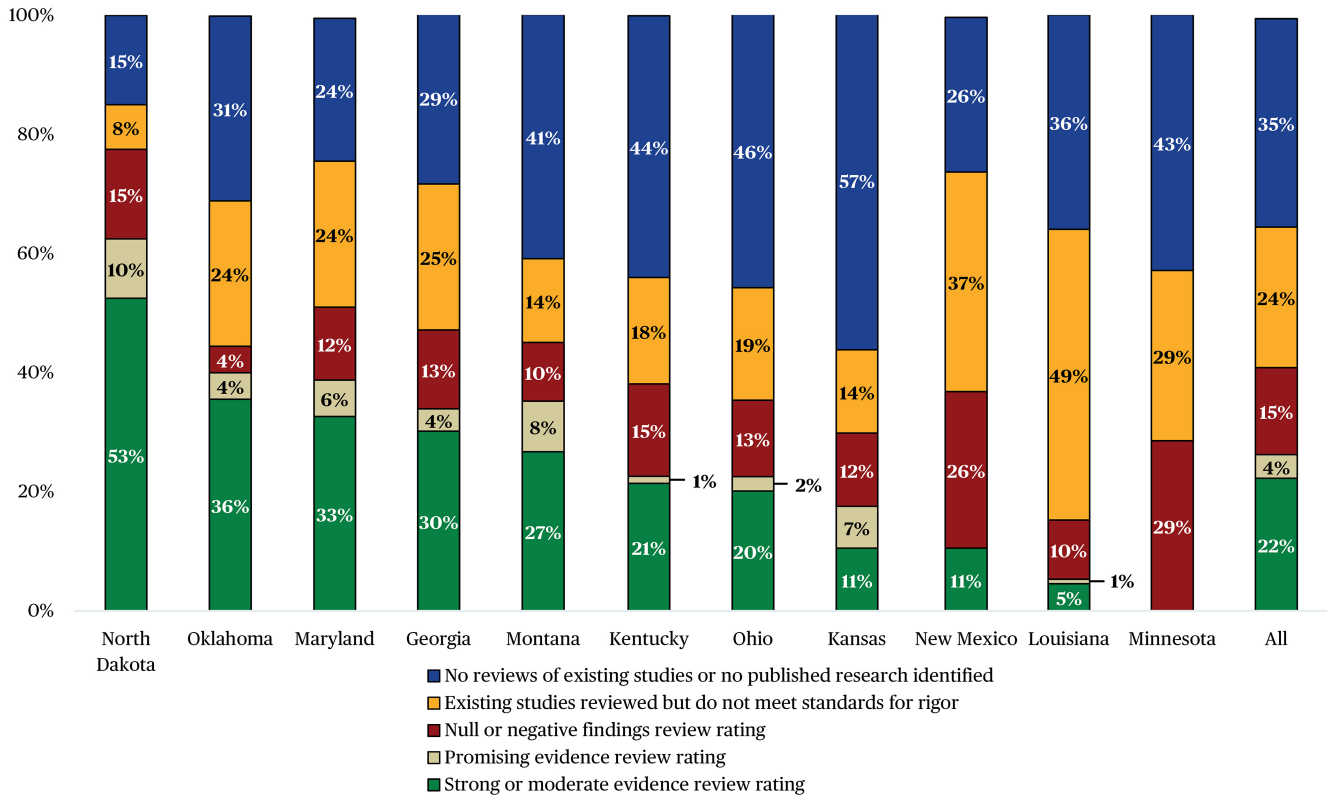
Note: One observation per program, regardless of the number of districts that listed it. Programs that were rated as strong or moderate evidence by both the WWC and Evidence for ESSA were counted in the WWC.

Source: SRCL district survey, Q14-15 ($n = 236$ programs) and review of WWC and Evidence for ESSA.

Many SRCL districts (62 percent) purchased more than one literacy program with SRCL funds (see Appendix Exhibit C.10). Collectively, the districts made 775 program purchases.²⁹ Of these purchases, 22 percent were for a program with a strong or moderate evidence review rating (Exhibit 4). This is higher than the percentage of programs in Exhibit 3 because more of the programs purchased by multiple districts were supported by strong or moderate evidence.³⁰ Specifically, two of the top three most frequently purchased programs were supported by strong or moderate evidence.

Although districts reported that choosing evidence-based programs was important, they also weighed programs' evidence base against other considerations. Most districts (74 percent) reported that they selected at least one literacy program based on evidence of improved student achievement. At the same time, over half of districts (57 percent) reported they selected a literacy program based on principal and teacher support, and one in five districts selected a program based on cost (see Appendix Exhibit C.16).

Exhibit 4. Percentage of district program purchases by evidence level, 2018-19, by state



Note: The order of data in the exhibit matches the order of labels in the legend.

The category “No reviews of existing studies or no published research identified” combines two categories from Exhibit 3.

Source: SRCL district survey, Q14-15 (n = 310 districts provided information regarding 775 literacy program purchases) and review of WWC and Evidence for ESSA.

The previous findings focus on newly adopted literacy programs purchased with SRCL funds. However, it is possible that districts already using programs supported by strong or moderate evidence opted to use their SRCL funds on other types of literacy resources. Teachers in SRCL schools were asked to list all literacy programs they used, regardless of funding source or when it was adopted. These teacher reports provide a broader picture of the evidence supporting literacy programs used in SRCL schools. Consistent with districts’ infrequent purchase of programs supported by strong or moderate evidence, only 35 percent of teachers in SRCL schools reported using such a program in year 2 of SRCL implementation (see Appendix Exhibits C.13a and C.13b).³¹ Another 16 percent of teachers used programs with null or negative effects.

- In addition, explicit support for districts to use programs supported by strong or moderate evidence was not a common state focus.*** Only two states (Montana and North Dakota) emphasized strong or moderate evidence in their grant competition process, according to interviews with state officials. These states explicitly stated a goal to fund only programs with strong or moderate evidence, and they did not allow other ESSA evidence tiers. Three states (Louisiana, Minnesota, and New Mexico) put little emphasis on strong or moderate evidence. The remaining six states placed some emphasis on evidence of program effectiveness, but without explicit mandates that programs meet the strong or moderate evidence tiers of ESSA (see Appendix Exhibit A.17). To illustrate the difference between state approaches, one state with an explicit focus on evidence required applicants to “implement a comprehensive literacy instruction program

supported by moderate or strong evidence,” and a state with less stringent requirements asked SRCL subgrant applicants to indicate “what they wanted to implement in their districts as far as programs and practices, which level of evidence it is, whether tier 1, 2, or 3, and if it wasn’t a tier, they had to provide [information demonstrating] that it was research based.”

In addition, state verification of the evidence base supporting districts’ program purchases was inconsistent. Of the 11 SRCL states, five reported that they reviewed the research underlying programs proposed by subgrantees to verify that the proposed programs were supported by strong or moderate evidence before making awards or before disbursing funds. Three other states required subgrant applicants to select a program from the state-approved list; however, the programs on these lists did not consistently meet ESSA standards for strong or moderate evidence. The remaining three states did not report independent verification of proposed programs’ evidence base. In addition, seven state officials referred district administrators to clearinghouses other than the WWC when selecting literacy programs, which may help explain the infrequent use of programs supported by strong or moderate evidence.

In interviews, state SRCL directors described certain challenges in relying on the WWC for selecting programs. These challenges include insufficient program options in the WWC (reported by seven states) and misalignment with local needs (reported by six states). As one state official explained, “WWC is our go-to, but some of the things that we did in SRCL, they’re not in WWC. We had to take evidence based on [program] performance in the past and how they’ve done in [our] districts because they’re not in the WWC.” At the time of this report, more than 80 programs have strong or moderate evidence in either the WWC or Evidence for ESSA.

There is some indication that efforts to emphasize the importance of strong and moderate evidence or to provide associated technical assistance were associated with district purchases of evidence-based literacy programs. North Dakota—which explicitly emphasized strong or moderate evidence as part of the subgrant competition—was the only state in which over half of literacy program purchases using SRCL funds were for programs with the highest levels of evidence in either WWC or Evidence for ESSA.³²

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES EMPHASIZED BY SRCL LESS WIDELY USED THAN EXPECTED

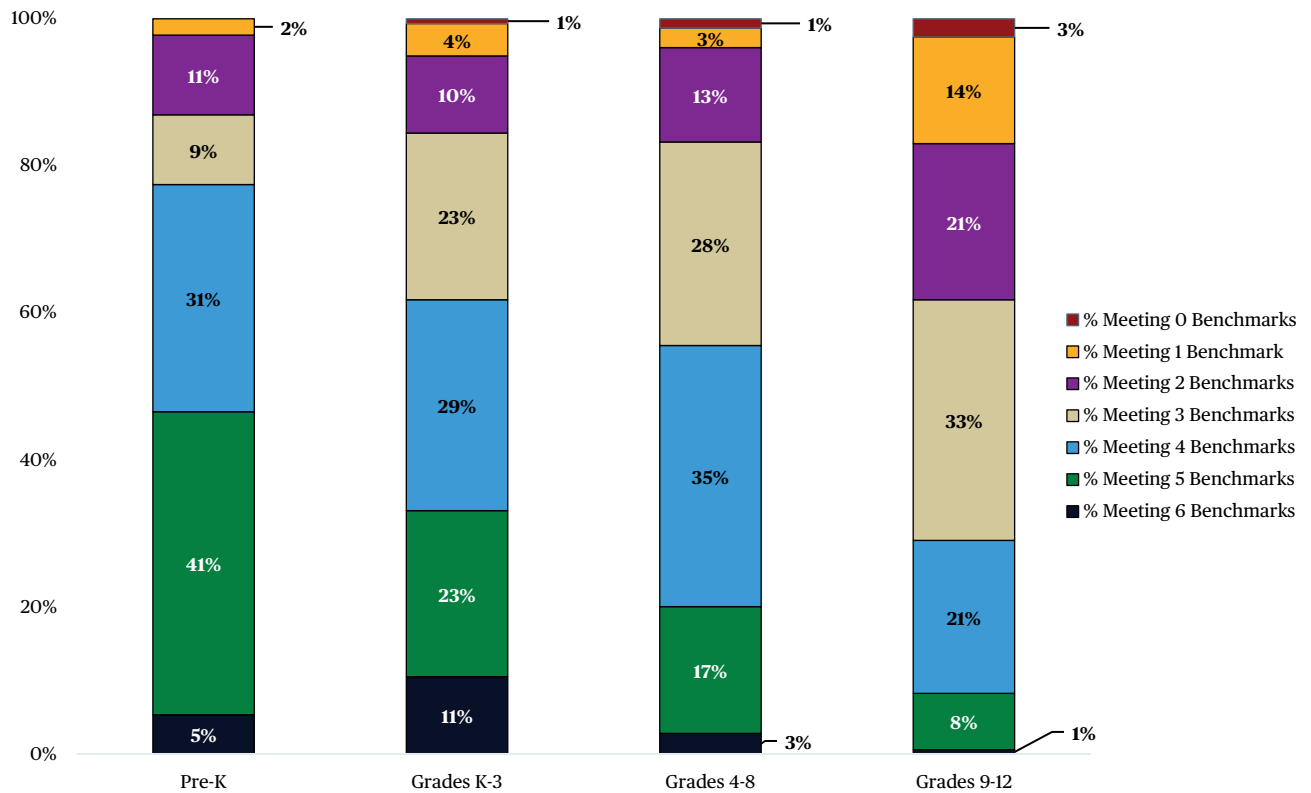
The primary mechanism for the SRCL program to meet its goal of improving students’ literacy skills was implementation of high-quality, comprehensive literacy instruction in classrooms. To be considered for a SRCL grant, a state was required to submit a comprehensive literacy plan informed by a recent needs assessment. In addition, states were required to ensure subgrants went to districts with a local literacy plan that provided for professional development and included interventions and practices supported by moderate or strong evidence.³³ States and districts could use SRCL funds to support instruction consistent with their plans—for example, by providing technical assistance, professional development, or coaching on evidence-based programs and practices.³⁴ To examine the prevalence of high-quality, comprehensive literacy instruction (CLI), the study focused on six features highlighted in the SRCL definition of CLI and that evidence suggests are especially salient in promoting literacy outcomes such as achievement on English language arts assessments (Box 3; see Appendix E).³⁵

Box 3. Six key features of comprehensive literacy instruction

1. *Emphasis on key domains of literacy*: Emphasis on phonics, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, and other domains appropriate for a student's grade level
2. *Use of explicit instructional strategies*: Teacher demonstration of strategies with frequent opportunities for student practice with feedback
3. *Differentiated instruction*: Instruction tailored to students' needs
4. *Use of formative assessment*: Assessments to identify students who could benefit from additional tailored support
5. *Frequent opportunities to practice reading and writing*: Opportunities to read daily and write extended text
6. *Assignment of age-appropriate reading materials*: Novels at the appropriate level of complexity

- ***Few teachers reported engaging in all six features of high-quality comprehensive literacy instruction, although most engaged in at least half of the features.*** No more than 11 percent of teachers in any grade band engaged in all six features, as determined by study-defined benchmarks (Exhibit 5; also see Box 1 and section B.3 in Appendix B for a discussion of the definition of the benchmarks). However, with the exception of high school teachers, more than four-fifths of teachers met at least three of the six benchmarks applicable to their grade. These results focus on the 2019-20 school year, which was the second year of SRCL funding for subgrantees.³⁶ While it may be that more time is required to achieve the hoped-for instructional changes, there were no differences in the percentage of teachers reporting use of the instructional features between the first 2 years of implementation.³⁷ There is some evidence that literacy-related professional development is associated with increased likelihood of meeting benchmarks for the features of CLI. Specifically, teachers who reported receiving professional development on specific literacy topics were generally more likely to meet benchmarks for the CLI features closely related to the topics than teachers who did not report receiving professional development on the topics (see Appendix Exhibits D.21 through D.29).

Exhibit 5. Percentage of teachers meeting benchmarks for 0–6 features of comprehensive literacy instruction, 2019–20, by grade band



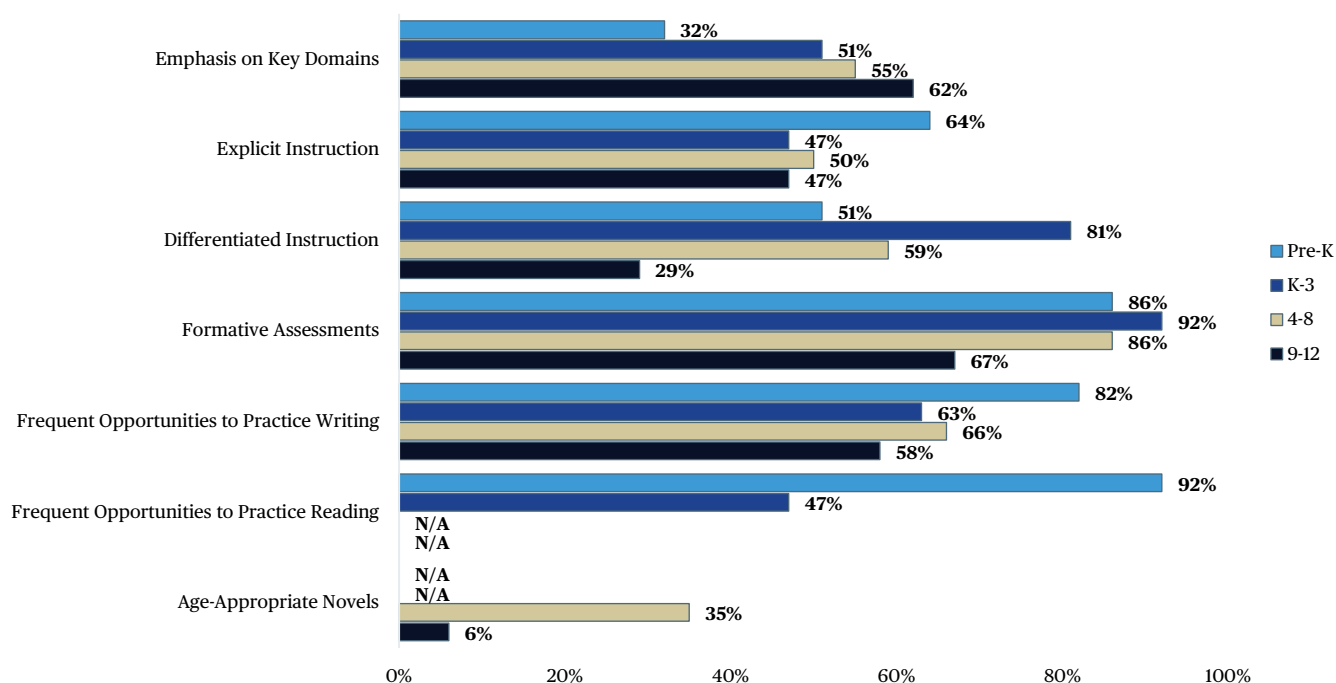
Note: The order of data in the exhibit matches the order of labels in the legend.

Source: SRCL year 2 teacher survey, Q19, Q21, Q25, Q27, Q29, Q32, Q33 (pre-K $n = 283$, grades K-3 $n = 729$, grades 4-8 $n = 351$, grades 9-12 $n = 169$). Six teachers taught in multiple grade bands and were not included in the analysis.

- Reported use of practices consistent with features of high-quality comprehensive literacy instruction was more prevalent among pre-K, elementary, and middle school teachers than high school teachers.** As shown in Exhibit 5, 86 percent of K-3 teachers met benchmarks for engaging in at least three of the six features of comprehensive literacy instruction. In contrast, 63 percent of high school teachers met benchmarks for engaging in at least half of the six features. Moreover, high school teachers often emphasized domains that the experts emphasized for younger students, including decoding, reading comprehension, and grammar (see Appendix Exhibit D.38). The differences across grade bands may have a number of explanations. For example, more instructional time is devoted to literacy in the early grades, potentially enabling the implementation of a wider range of literacy practices.³⁸ Another explanation may be that early reading has been a sustained focus of federal policy since at least 2001, with the establishment of the Reading First and Early Reading First programs as part of No Child Left Behind. Reading in the middle and high school grades has received relatively less federal policy attention prior to SRCL.³⁹ Finally, it is possible that the emphasis high school teachers gave to topics that experts emphasized for younger students might reflect the fact that many students enter high school struggling with basic reading.⁴⁰
- Among the six evidence-based features, only one—formative assessments to guide instruction—was widely used by teachers in all grade bands.** Across all grade bands except pre-K, formative assessment to guide

instruction was the most commonly used feature of comprehensive literacy instruction—the only feature for which at least two thirds of teachers in each grade band met the study’s benchmark (Exhibit 6). All six features the study examined are included in ESSA’s definition of comprehensive literacy instruction, but the wide use of formative assessment may also reflect the fact that a broad set of federal laws, including ESSA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, encourage the use of formative assessments. For example, ESSA suggests that grant funds to local education agencies can be used for training and technical assistance to build local capacity to administer and use formative assessments.⁴¹ The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 encouraged the use of formative assessments for screening and monitoring student progress, especially in early grades.⁴²

Exhibit 6. Percentage of teachers meeting benchmarks for features of comprehensive literacy instruction, 2019-20, by grade band



Note: The order of data in the exhibit matches the order of labels in the legend.

N/A = Not available. Survey did not include items for this feature for the specified grade level.

Source: SRCL year 2 teacher survey (pre-K $n = 283$, grades K-3 $n = 729$, grades 4-8 $n = 351$, grades 9-12 $n = 169$). Six teachers taught in multiple grade bands and were not included in the analysis.

- Evidence from the first year of implementation shows no difference between SRCL and comparable non-SRCL schools in ELA achievement trends overall.** Combining results across states and grades, the overall difference in ELA achievement between SRCL and non-SRCL schools with similar demographic characteristics was very close to zero and not statistically significant.⁴³ There were also no significant differences for individual states, with the exception of Louisiana and Ohio, which had small positive differences in achievement. No states had statistically significant differences in achievement among students traditionally considered to be disadvantaged.⁴⁴ These results are based on data from the 2018-19 school year, the first year of SRCL implementation in schools. It is possible that differences in students’ literacy skills between SRCL and non-SRCL schools increased in 2019-20, the second year of SRCL implementation, after

schools had more time to implement programs and practices funded by SRCL subgrants. However, test score data were not available for 2019-20 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also important to note that these achievement findings do not provide conclusive evidence on the effectiveness of the SRCL program. Although the comparisons were based on SRCL schools and matched non-SRCL schools that were similar in prior achievement and other characteristics (see Appendix Exhibit B.45), the two groups of schools could differ in unmeasured characteristics, and those differences could have influenced the results.

LESSONS LEARNED AND LOOKING AHEAD

This study's findings underscore both the benefits and challenges of providing funding to states to improve literacy instruction with flexibility to meet local needs. The same approach is being used by SRCL's successor program, the Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant Program (CLSD). Thus, it is important to expand the learning from this study to inform improvements to the CLSD program as well as other federal, state, and local efforts to enhance literacy instruction.

In particular, federal and state policymakers might want to consider these key aspects of the comprehensive literacy program approach:

- **Targeting program funds where needs are greatest.** The program emphasized serving disadvantaged students while allowing states substantial flexibility in determining how to target funds. Accordingly, states varied in what student population characteristics they considered as well as the thresholds they used to determine the level of disadvantage when funding schools. In some states, almost every school was considered “disadvantaged” according to the state’s own criteria, while other states set more stringent guidelines. The program’s flexibility was intended to allow states to focus on the specific needs identified by their districts. However, this flexibility may have limited the program goal of targeting disadvantaged students. Also, in the case of competitive grant programs, funds can only be targeted to schools with disadvantaged students if the districts with those schools choose to apply; many districts in need of programs such as SRCL may lack the capacity to write competitive grant applications.⁴⁵ The study’s targeting findings might indicate a need for more explicit program targeting thresholds or additional technical assistance to support state competitions.
- **Improving support for evidence-based programs and strategies.** The program’s emphasis on using the highest levels of evidence in programmatic decisions was clearly a challenge across states. While states did seem to consider evidence in their subgrant decisions, few emphasized the highest levels of evidence intended by the program. The language in the program’s evidence requirement to fund activities supported by moderate or strong evidence, “*where evidence is applicable and available,*” may be a contributing factor. In fact, states reported allowing activities with lower levels of evidence even though there are more than 80 literacy programs in the WWC and Evidence for ESSA databases that meet SRCL’s higher evidence bar. The Department may need to provide technical assistance to states to increase selection of programs supported by the highest levels of evidence while honoring states’ emphasis on local control and responding to local needs. This technical assistance might include support for state subgrant competition notices, selection criteria, and ways of assessing the strength of evidence supporting proposed literacy programs.

- **Improving implementation of instructional activities consistent with improving student reading achievement.** The study findings suggest challenges in implementing comprehensive literacy instruction. The limited teacher reports of using evidence-based practices are consistent with the lack of difference in student reading growth between SRCL-funded schools and similar non-funded schools. In addition, the results indicating a lower level of implementation of comprehensive literacy instruction for high school than elementary teachers suggests that more research is needed on high school literacy instruction, particularly instruction for students who enter high school lacking basic reading skills.⁴⁶
- **Conducting research on longer grant periods.** It is possible that more time and effort are needed to roll out a competitive program like SRCL in ways that shift instructional practice enough to improve student outcomes. SRCL grants were originally awarded for 3 years, and district subgrants were originally awarded for a 2- or 3-year period. Due to the variation in the length of subgrant awards, the evaluation's data did not capture the full implementation period for some districts. In addition, after the evaluation's data collection ended, all states received at least a 1-year grant extension through 2020-21 (six states received extensions through 2021-22). It is possible that the alignment between grantee implementation and federal objectives in the extension years differed from alignment during the time period documented by the evaluation. Thus, this evaluation's measurement may have been conducted too early to realistically expect local implementation or outcomes to show alignment with SRCL's objectives. The CLSD program allows longer grant periods of up to 5 years and has a similar emphasis on evidence-based practices. The next evaluation report will present results from a rigorous study of CLSD's effect on teachers' instructional practices and student achievement, as well as findings on achievement trends in CLSD-funded schools.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Mulligan, G. M., McCarroll, J. C., Flanagan, K. D., & Potter, D. (2015).
- ² The Nation’s Report Card. (2022). In this context, the NAEP *proficient* level is considered to be on grade level. Students performing at or above the NAEP *proficient* level demonstrate solid academic performance and competency over challenging subject matter. The NAEP *proficient* achievement level does not necessarily represent grade-level proficiency as determined by other assessment standards (for example, state or district assessments).
- ³ Note that English learners, by definition, do not yet have the English proficiency to achieve on English literacy outcomes relative to their English-proficient peers.
- ⁴ SRCL was originally funded/authorized as part of the FY 2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act (Pub. L. No. 111-117) under the Title I demonstration authority (Part E, Section 1502 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The Act reserved \$10 million for formula grants to assist states in creating a State Literacy Team and developing a comprehensive literacy plan. Forty-six states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico received these grants in 2010.
- ⁵ Six states were awarded grants in 2011 and 11 states were awarded grants in 2017. Three states received grants in both rounds.
- ⁶ State grant amounts ranged from \$27,773,899 to \$288,709,720 in 2011 and from \$20,000,000 to \$61,579,800 in 2017. See Appendix A for more details about grant size for each state.
- ⁷ The Department updated the program priorities, requirements, and definitions in 2017 to provide for a smooth transition to the Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) program. CLSD is a substantively similar program to SRCL authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended in 2015 by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Changes to the SRCL program between 2011 and 2017 included explicitly requiring programs to be supported by moderate or strong evidence as defined in ESSA and replacing the SRCL definition of “effective literacy instruction” with the CLSD definition of “comprehensive literacy instruction.”
- ⁸ The 11 states were awarded a total of \$364 million in grants. This amount represents about one third of all SRCL funds awarded competitively over the life of the program. These 3-year grants to states ranged from \$20,000,000 to \$61,579,800, supporting from 57 to 1,033 schools per state. The 11 states funded 291 SRCL subgrants through a competitive award process to a combination of districts and consortia; in total, 435 districts received SRCL funds. SRCL-funded schools received funding ranging from nearly \$44,000 to more than \$350,000, with an average award of \$129,006 per school. In contrast, the Reading First program was initially funded at approximately \$1 billion per year, with grants to states that ranged from \$518,781 to \$152,898,960 per year and that supported between 14 and 905 schools per state. In 2004-05, the median Reading First school-level grant was \$138,000. See Moss, M., Jacob, R., Boulay, B., Horst, M., & Poulos, J. (2006).
- ⁹ Appendix B provides details of the data collection activities, measures, and sampling methods used in the evaluation.
- ¹⁰ The sample was selected to represent schools receiving SRCL funds in each SRCL state.

- ¹¹ The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is an investment of the Institute of Education Sciences within the U.S. Department of Education. The goal of the WWC is to help teachers, administrators, and policymakers make evidence-based decisions. The WWC reviews published evidence of effectiveness of education programs, policies, or practices using a consistent and transparent set of standards.
- ¹² Evidence for ESSA ratings are produced by the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University School of Education to help educational leaders find programs that meet ESSA’s evidence standards.
- ¹³ The study team also scanned existing literature to identify published studies for SRCL-funded programs not yet reviewed by WWC or Evidence for ESSA; studies for 10 of these programs were reviewed using the WWC rating criteria. The results of this evidence review appear in Appendix F.
- ¹⁴ See Appendix B for more details about analysis methods and the creation of benchmarks used in the evaluation.
- ¹⁵ See Appendix E for details on how the evaluation developed this set of features from the 12 components included in the definition of comprehensive literacy instruction used by SRCL.
- ¹⁶ See <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4> for results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress.
- ¹⁷ See <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/groups/?grade=4> for further details about achievement gaps.
- ¹⁸ See, for instance, Mulligan, G. M., Hastedt, S., and McCarroll, J. C. (2012).
- ¹⁹ See, for instance, Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., and Griffin, P. (1998), and more recently Petscher, Y., Cabell, S. Q., Catts, H. W., Compton, D. L., Foorman, B. R., Hart, S. A., Lonigan, C. J., Phillips, B. M., Schatschneider, C., Steacy, L. M., Terry, N. P., & Wagner, R. K. (2020).
- ²⁰ SRCL defined a disadvantaged child as a “child from birth to grade 12 who is at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, including a child living in poverty, a child with a disability, or a child who is an English learner. Includes infants and toddlers with developmental delays or a child who is far below grade level, who has left school before receiving a high school diploma, who is at risk of not graduating on time, who is homeless, in foster care, or has been incarcerated.”
- ²¹ The study uses these four categories of disadvantage to analyze targeting; see Box 1 of this report and section B.5 of Appendix B for details regarding how the study classified schools as disadvantaged.
- ²² Data on measures of disadvantage other than free or reduced-price lunch eligibility, students in special education, English learners, and standardized test scores are not consistently available in administrative data sources, and thus are excluded from the study’s analyses of targeting.
- ²³ One possible contributor to the result in North Dakota is the state’s high prevalence of missing data on the study’s measures of disadvantage. Sixty-six percent of schools in North Dakota are missing data on one or more of the measures, and these schools are excluded from the analysis in Exhibit 2. When schools with data on any of the four measures are included in the analysis, as in Appendix Exhibit C.4a, 38 percent of SRCL schools and 14 percent of non-SRCL schools are classified as disadvantaged according to the study’s definition, implying that North Dakota exhibits substantial targeting when these schools are included.

- ²⁴ For further information on state criteria for targeting schools with disadvantaged students, please see Appendix Exhibit A.16.
- ²⁵ One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that states did not receive many applications from districts that met the definition of disadvantage. However, data on the total number (and identity of) all applicant districts was unavailable to the study team.
- ²⁶ For example, see <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuides>.
- ²⁷ A total of 310 districts used SRCL funds to purchase a literacy program and wrote in the name of an identifiable program in response to a survey item that asked about named programs (Q14-15).
- ²⁸ Analyses of the evidence base supporting programs purchased with SRCL funds included reviews conducted by the What Works Clearinghouse and the Evidence for ESSA clearinghouse.
- ²⁹ There were 775 district purchases because some districts purchased more than one program and because some of the 236 distinct programs were purchased by multiple districts.
- ³⁰ Other related analyses yield similar findings. For example, Appendix Exhibit C.11 presents results of an analysis that categorized each district according to the highest evidence level across all of the programs that it purchased with SRCL funds. The results indicate that 45 percent of all districts purchased at least one program supported by strong or moderate evidence. An analysis of the consistency of districts' purchases found that five percent of districts purchased *only* programs supported by strong or moderate evidence (Appendix Exhibit D.2).
- ³¹ The percentage of teachers in SRCL schools reporting use of a literacy program supported by moderate or strong evidence was 33 percent in year 1 and 35 percent in year 2, but the difference was not significant.
- ³² Note that not all districts used SRCL funds to purchase literacy programs. In Minnesota, for example, only about a quarter of districts (26 percent) used SRCL funds for purchases that the study team classified as programs, whereas in North Dakota, all SRCL districts purchased programs (see Appendix Exhibit C.12 for more details).
- ³³ <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/05/16/2017-09896/applications-for-new-awards-striving-readers-comprehensive-literacy-program>
- ³⁴ See Appendix Exhibit A.3 for a list of the most common expenditures funded by SRCL.
- ³⁵ Instruction in SRCL schools may of course be influenced by many factors other than the SRCL program, including teachers' prior training and professional development and districtwide instructional initiatives.
- ³⁶ Seven states awarded 2-year subgrants and four states awarded 3-year subgrants. All states received extensions through 2020-21 or 2021-22. Thus, the 2019-20 study data represent the second of 3 implementation years for subgrantees in five states and the second of 4 implementation years for subgrantees in the remaining six states. However, because implementation years 3 and 4 would have been in the context of pandemic-related disruptions, pre-pandemic survey data from 2019-20 constitute the most reliable data on SRCL implementation.
- ³⁷ See Appendix Exhibits C.21 through C.24 for the percentages of teachers meeting each benchmark by year of implementation.

³⁸ Mulvaney Hoyer, K., Sparks, D., & Ralph, J. (2017).

³⁹ A previous version of Striving Readers focused on raising the reading achievement of middle school and high school students. That program provided over \$150 million to fund eight grantees in FY 2006 and eight grantees in FY 2009. See Boulay, B., Goodson, B., Frye, M., Blocklin, M., & Price, C. (2015).

⁴⁰ In 2019, 27 percent of eighth-grade students scored below basic on the NAEP, indicating that they were reading far below the high school level. Among students in poverty, 40 percent scored below basic. See The Nation's Report Card (2022).

⁴¹ Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation. (2017).

⁴² Berkeley, S., Scanlon, D., Bailey, T. R., Sutton, J. C., & Sacco, D. M. (2020).

⁴³ The difference in ELA achievement between SRCL and similar non-SRCL schools was less than 0.001 student standard deviations. See section C.4 in Appendix C for further details.

⁴⁴ See section C.4 in Appendix C for further details.

⁴⁵ School districts enrolling high percentages of low-income and minority students often have fewer fiscal resources and less-qualified staff than do districts with more affluent students (Baker et al., 2018; Duncombe, 2017), which may reduce their capacity to write competitive grant applications. In addition, scholars have found that lower-capacity state education agencies experience less successful implementation of competitive federal grants (Manna & Ryan, 2011), a finding which may generalize to school districts as well. Although not directly related to education, Lowe, Reckow, and Gainsborough (2016) found that lower-capacity metropolitan regions are less effective in competitive transportation grant competitions.

⁴⁶ Available research indicates that intensive intervention, perhaps one on one, may be effective for struggling adolescent readers. See Kamil, M. L., Borman, G. D., Dole, J., Kral, C. C., Salinger, T., & Torgesen, J. (2008).

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