



## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Extra Time Spent on Reading Boosts Literacy**

SAN DIEGO'S SWEEPING REFORMS PROVIDE LESSONS ABOUT WHAT WORKS

SAN FRANCISCO, August 18, 2010—Struggling elementary and middle school students who are given extra time for reading can make sizable gains in literacy, according to a report released today by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC).

The report is the first evaluation of the long-term effects of a sweeping reform program implemented in the San Diego Unified School District—the state's second largest and one that mirrors the demographics of other large districts—and draws lessons that can be used nationwide. It comes at a time of national debate over efforts to improve public school accountability. These efforts include setting content standards and student testing—but offer little guidance about how to help students improve.

To address this knowledge gap, the PPIC study analyzes San Diego reforms that were in effect from 2000 to 2005 and attracted national attention. Some of the reforms were preventive, targeting students who read at or above grade level. But most were aimed at students identified as lagging in reading. All had two common elements:

- Extra time for reading, either during the school day, before or after school, in a session between terms, in summer school, or as part of an extended school year.
- Professional development for teachers, largely through peer coaching in how to teach reading.

Not all of the reforms worked. Summer session and supervised reading periods before or after school, for example, did not significantly affect student achievement. Some reforms took years to work. But overall, many aspects of the program were successful.

“It is crucial that reading reforms be comprehensive and well articulated across grades, not scattershot,” says Julian Betts, co-author, PPIC adjunct fellow, and professor of economics at the University of California, San Diego. “Most important, reformers need patience. We found that several elements, most notably the peer coaching system, had zero effect in the first year of the program but appeared to contribute to reading gains later on.”

The PPIC analysis of the program looks at complete student academic records, including test scores, courses taken, and absences, from fall 1999 through spring 2005. Among its key findings:

- **Middle school students who took extended-length English classes made big gains.** Middle school students who read below grade level were required to take English classes that were two or three periods long. Their reading scores improved by 1.6 percentile points and 5.5 percentile points, respectively, per year.
- **A longer school year at elementary schools with the weakest reading scores led to moderate gains.** At these schools, student test scores improved 0.75 percentile points each year. In other words, a child

participating in a longer school year for four years could be expected to move up 3 percentile points in district rankings.

- **Early intervention is most effective.** The reforms failed to improve reading in high school, and several elements of the high school interventions had a negative effect on achievement. For instance, the reading test scores for high school students who took double-or triple-length English classes dropped 3.0 and 1.3 percentile points per year, respectively. However, even in high school, one reform had a positive outcome: students who participated in the triple-length classes were more likely to be promoted to the next grade.
- **The reforms did not cause negative side effects.** The report carefully searches for side effects of the extra attention devoted to reading—specifically, lower math scores, higher absence rates, lower graduation rates, and lower rates of completion of California’s A–G college preparatory coursework. The report found few negative side effects and in some cases positive ones. For example, participants were less likely to be held back a grade in high school.

The school district paid for its program through internal funds, foundation grants, and a waiver that allowed more flexible use of federal funds. The PPIC report concludes that specific changes in both state and federal policies—such as making these waivers simpler to obtain—can foster reform elsewhere.

“The federal government, in particular, can encourage innovation by allowing districts more flexibility, on the condition that programs be carefully designed and aligned with the overall goal of boosting achievement across the board,” Betts says.

The report, *Lessons in Reading Reform: Finding What Works*, is co-authored by Andrew Zau, senior statistician in the Department of Economics at UCSD, and Cory Koedel, assistant professor of economics at the University of Missouri, Columbia. It is supported with funding from the Donald Bren Foundation. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provided additional support.

## **ABOUT PPIC**

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