

Keys to Understanding the *What Works Clearinghouse* Intervention Report on the Wilson Reading System®

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) was established in 2002 by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences to provide evidence of what works in education. The WWC identifies studies on effectiveness of educational interventions that meet its evidence standards. It reports on previously completed studies but *does not independently* evaluate the interventions.

In July 2007, the WWC released its Intervention Report on the Wilson Reading System® (WRS), published in 1988 by Wilson Language Training Corporation. Only 24 programs of the 153 programs examined by the WWC met their evidence screens. The Wilson Reading System had a sufficiently rigorous study to be included in the review. The study that met the WWC evidence standards is the *National assessment of Title I interim report—Volume II: Closing the reading gap: First year findings from a randomized trial of four reading interventions for striving readers* (a.k.a. the Haan Foundations' Power4Kids' "Closing the Reading Gap" study).

Given the WWC report and rating is based solely on the Haan Foundation's "Closing the Reading Gap" study, it is important to consider the following aspects about that study.

"CLOSING THE READING GAP" STUDY

An esteemed Scientific Advisory Board selected the Wilson Reading System to participate in its landmark study that met scientifically rigorous design standards. For the purposes of the study, researchers requested that the comprehension and vocabulary components of the WRS program be excluded in order to test a specific hypothesis about the impact of word-level instruction. Further explanation from the researchers about the partial implementation of WRS can be found at: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20064000/gap_b.asp. The following aspects about the "Closing the Reading Gap" study should be considered:

- Wilson agreed to eliminate comprehension and vocabulary from instruction at the request of the researchers and followed this protocol dutifully. In a time-by-activity analysis, vocabulary and comprehension were incidentally addressed for only 2.8 minutes per WRS lesson during the study. This is compared to the WRS standard schedule of 20-30 minutes per lesson.
- The WRS instruction in the study focused on word-level skills only. WRS students in the study showed a **statistically significant** impact in this domain. This is noteworthy given that the control group generally had more positive gains than is normally expected according to the researchers.
- The modified version of Wilson *did* yield student improvement in comprehension, fluency and vocabulary, but this improvement was not statistically significant when compared to the control group. Since the study design was to report the impact or "value added" of the intervention, which is the amount of improvement above the comparison group, and since the comparison group made gains in these areas, the *value added* analysis of the intervention showed less than expected gains, but again, these components were not taught.
- The study's Executive Summary stated that the study group, as a whole, was substantially less impaired in basic reading skills than most samples used in previous research. In a recent report published by the Center on Instruction, the Haan study was analyzed and it was concluded that, "It is likely that most of the students did not really need the focused instruction in basic phonemic decoding skills in the word-level interventions, and would have profited much more from work to build text-reading fluency and from research-based instruction in reading comprehension." (Torgesen, et al., page 78.)
- Teachers reported that since many WRS sessions took place during student's regular reading time, WRS students received less reading instruction in the classroom than did students in the comparison group. The comparison group received their regular reading instruction and, in many cases, an additional pull-out program as well. Since the comprehension instruction was eliminated in Wilson

treatment groups, Wilson students possibly received little-to-no comprehension instruction because they did not receive their regular classroom reading time. Therefore, these struggling students who require more reading practice, actually received less practice in the areas of need.

WHAT WORKS CLEARINGHOUSE REPORT

The following factors should be considered when evaluating the What Works Clearinghouse report.

- The WWC rated WRS alphabets as *having potentially positive effects*, despite the *significant* evidence of the “Closing the Reading Gap” study in this domain. This is solely because only one WRS study met the WWC evidence standard, whereas in order to get the “positive effects” designation, the WWC requires two or more studies that meet their standards for inclusion.
- The WWC report designated no discernable effects in the areas of comprehension and fluency. Appropriately, the WWC clarifies that the comprehension and vocabulary components of the WRS were not taught as part of the reported study. Please note, however, that the WWC summary graph does not clearly indicate that this modified version of Wilson was used to determine the rating.
- In the WRS program, fluency is closely linked with comprehension. Thus, it is the logical result that the students using the modified version of the WRS in the “Closing the Reading Gap” study would not show significant gains over the comparison group students in the areas of fluency and comprehension.
- Dr. Joseph Torgesen, the Principal Investigator in “Closing the Reading Gap” study, stated to the WWC evaluation committee that because only a limited portion of the WRS was implemented in the study, it did not produce a fair evaluation of the WRS as it is implemented in schools.

CONCLUSION

Since 1988, Wilson Language Training has made substantial contributions to the field in identifying student deficiencies and providing research-based practices (materials and professional development resources) to meet the needs of struggling older students. The Wilson Reading System, when fully implemented, provides word-reading instruction as well as vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, and has so since its publication in 1988. Additionally, in 2007, Wilson published a supplemental fluency program (Wilson Fluency™ / Basic) to provide additional practice with connected text.

The What Works Clearinghouse report is reporting on previously completed studies but *does not independently* evaluate the interventions. The “Closing the Reading Gap” study included in their review showed significant evidence of effectiveness in alphabets and because of its design and modified version of the WRS program, it did not fairly measure fluency and comprehension. These factors should be considered when evaluating the What Works Clearinghouse report.

REFERENCES

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