Just Words®

Studies of Program Effectiveness

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Program Overview

Just Words® is an explicit, multimodal decoding and spelling program for students in grades 4–12 and adults who have word-level reading gaps but do not require intensive intervention. It provides explicit teaching of "how English works," offering strategies that enable students to read and spell words independently and build the skills necessary to access and master grade-level standards.

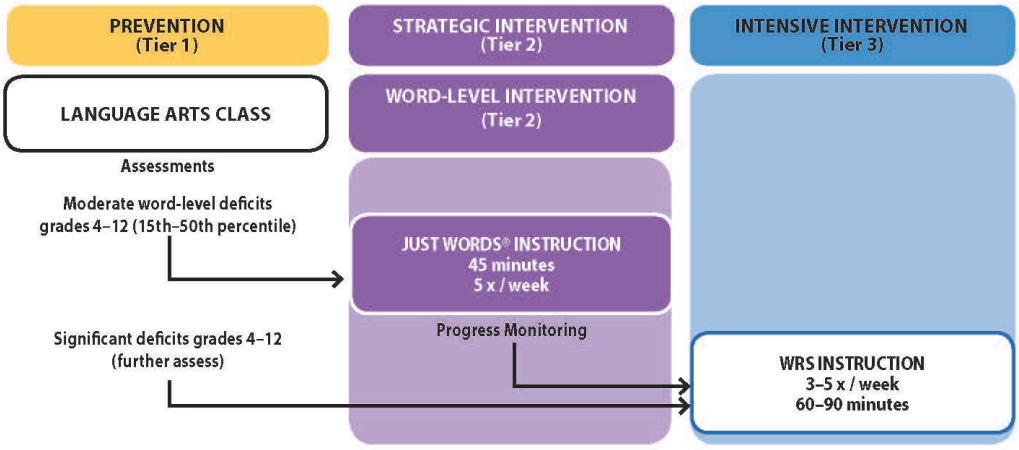
As with all of Wilson's programs, Just Words® aligns with a clear and thoroughly documented research base. Originally published in 2009, the program's design was based on data from school districts experiencing success using the research-validated Wilson Reading System® (WRS).

Program highlights include:

- Supports states' rigorous college- and career-readiness standards with strategies for struggling readers who have not mastered the foundational skills typically learned in K-3.
- Provides a rigorous study of word structure and the foundational and language standards necessary to build decoding and spelling automaticity to access grade-level text.
- Incorporates accelerated pacing of word structure based on the research-validated WRS.
- Emphasizes phonemic awareness, phonics, word study, and spelling.
- Includes explicit, systematic teaching of six syllable types and common Latin roots.
- Offers extensive student practice with multiple opportunities for skills development.
- Monitors students' progress throughout the program.
- Incorporates teacher support through the Instructor Manual and online Learning Community.

The following graphic illustrates how the Just Words program can be implemented as a Tier 2 intervention in a school or district within a multitiered systems of support, MTSS, framework. Just Words is compatible with the Tier 3 intensive Wilson Reading System® program.

Figure 1: Implementation of Just Words within an MTSS framework



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Summary of Key Findings

A study examining results from over 360 students during the 2023-2024 school year reaffirmed the success of the *Just Words*® program in providing effective intervention support to improve skills for students with decoding, word study, and spelling gaps. This study qualified as an ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) Level 3 study. ESSA evidence provides educators with reliable, easy-to-use information on programs and practices that meet the standards of evidence established in ESSA.

This study analyzed results on two measures, the WIST (Word Identification and Spelling Test) and the TOSWRF-2 (Test of Silent Word Reading Fluency, 2nd edition) from students in grades 4-12 across eight schools in four districts.

Researchers found that *Just Words*® students:

- **Outperformed their peers, who did not participate in *Just Words,* in word identification and spelling**, with statistically significant gains and large and medium effect sizes across multiple measures of word identification and spelling.
    - As measured by the WIST, students' abilities to read and spell real words improved, in addition to their ability to read pseudowords. This suggests that students can apply the concepts learned in *Just Words* to tackle previously unseen words.
    - Improved performance on the TOSWRF-2, a timed measure of word-reading accuracy, suggests that students were able to improve their fluency by identifying words more quickly and accurately. Fluent reading is associated with improved comprehension.
- **Demonstrated significant improvements in literacy skills across the grade levels** compared to those receiving business-as-usual (standard) instruction.
    - High school students made approximately one years' worth of growth in six months, and middle school (6-8) and upper elementary (4-5) students made at least one year's growth, despite these populations spending less than 15% of their daily learning time (based on a 6- or 7-hour day) in the program and being historically striving readers who are associated with decelerated learning rates. This rate of growth exceeds what is expected from standard instruction that may not include intervention that *Just Words* provides.
- **Benefitted similarly across demographic groups**. Diverse populations benefited equally when compared to their peers, effectively narrowing achievement gaps in core literacy skills of word recognition, spelling, and word reading fluency. This narrowing is particularly noteworthy as schools face challenges in decreasing the achievement gap.

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- Students classified as English language learners (ELLs) showed gains equal to their peers.
- Students receiving Free/Reduced lunch showed gains equal to their peers.
- Students with IEPs showed gains equal to their peers.

These results confirm that *Just Words* is an effective intervention for Tier 2 support for students across diverse populations.

Researchers also found high levels of teacher and administrator satisfaction with Just Words.

Surveys collected during the study indicate high levels of teacher and administrator satisfaction with and strong support for the *Just Words* program.

Teachers said:

"*Just Words helps students read and write better in all their classes, especially in ELA.*"

"*Students sustained growth + skills that they can implement in other classes and real world.*"

Administrators shared:

"*The students' foundational skills in decoding and encoding were significantly improved. The skills were applied to a variety of different settings.*

"*We saw an increase in our iReady scores in students enrolled in Just Words. Students were engaged and follow along in their core classes better.*"

Previous studies have confirmed the impact of Just Words®:

- Seventh-grade students who received instruction through the Just Words program made larger gains in **reading comprehension** than their peers who received instruction as usual, resulting in a large reduction in students classified as severely at risk.
- **Multilingual learners (MLLs)** in seventh grade who received Just Words instruction made greater gains in **reading comprehension** than MLLs who received instruction as usual.
- Fourth- and fifth-grade students with word-level deficits who received instruction through the Just Words program made significant gains on **word reading fluency and reading accuracy** after receiving a semester of Just Words instruction. This allowed many students to close the gap and meet benchmarks.
- **MLLs** with word-level deficits in fourth and fifth grade who received instruction through the Just Words program made **significant gains in word reading fluency and reading accuracy**. Prior to receiving Just Words instruction, these students were well below

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benchmark in oral reading fluency and word reading accuracy. After a semester of Just Words instruction, these scores were at or approaching benchmark levels.

- The **gains in oral reading fluency and word reading accuracy made by MLLs were equivalent to the gains made by their native English-speaking peers.**
- Sixth- and seventh-grade students who received three semesters of Just Words instruction experienced an **average gain of two grade levels in word recognition and an average gain of 3.4 grade levels in their ability to decode words.**

The following pages provide greater depth of information on these findings.

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ESSA LEVEL 3 STUDY IN 8 NORTHEAST SCHOOLS, GRADES 4-12

Introduction/Background

A yearlong study of the Just Words® program was conducted by a third-party researcher. Four school districts from Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island participated during the 2023-2024 school year. The study was designed to assess the effectiveness of Just Words, which uses a structured literacy approach to enhance word-level reading skills, vocabulary, and spelling among struggling learners in grades 4-12. The participating districts each had two schools involved in the study, for a total of eight schools.

Prior to implementing Just Words, teachers participated in workshops led by certified Just Words trainers covering essential aspects such as program overview and components, lesson planning, differentiated instruction, and progress monitoring techniques. Following the initial workshops, WLT provided ongoing professional development through virtual implementation support (VIS) coaching sessions and facilitated Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to foster collaboration and professional growth among teachers. Instruction was conducted through small-group lessons of 45 minutes each, three to five times a week.

Purpose of Study

A quasi-experimental design was used, involving over 500 students across grades 4-12 who were referred by classroom teachers as needing support and identified based on pretest scores on the *Word Identification and Spelling Test* (WIST) and *Test of Silent Word Reading Fluency* (TOSWRF-2). The students scoring between the 15th and 50th percentile on either assessment were deemed eligible for the Just Words intervention. The effect of the Just Words program was compared to business-as-usual (standard) instruction on improving literacy outcomes for students facing challenges, particularly those from diverse educational backgrounds, including English language learners (ELLs), students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and those receiving free or reduced lunch (FRL).

The following key research questions guided the study:

1. Is Just Words effective as a supplemental or Tier 2 intervention program in helping students who have not yet mastered foundational skills improve literacy skills?
2. Is Just Words effective in enhancing literacy skills among students from diverse backgrounds, including English language learners (ELLs) and those with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or those receiving free/reduced lunch?
3. How does implementation quality influence the effectiveness of the Just Words program in improving student literacy?

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Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative assessments and qualitative data collection methods to analyze student outcomes and instructional practices. Data were aggregated for all students across all grades in all schools and were disaggregated by grade band for elementary school grades 4 and 5 (n=209), middle school grades 6 through 8 (n=298), and high school grades 9 through 12 (n=41). This included two individually administered assessments, WIST and TOSWRF-2, to measure student skills in word identification, spelling and silent word reading fluency before and after Just Words implementation, surveys of teachers and school administrators, and a review of program documentation provided by WLT literacy staff. Several statistical analytical procedures were used to analyze data, including multiple regression, paired samples t-tests, and analysis of variance on student literacy outcome data to determine the effect of Just Words, the influence of student backgrounds, or level of implementation.

Summary of Findings

The analysis revealed significant improvements in literacy skills among students participating in the Just Words program compared to a comparison group receiving business-as-usual (standard) instruction. Key findings include:

- The Just Words program **significantly improved literacy skills** among participating students across the grades compared to a comparison group receiving business-as-usual (standard) instruction. Notably, students in the Just Words group **outperformed their peers in word identification and spelling**, with multiple regression analyses confirming the program's positive impact.
- Students receiving Just Words **demonstrated substantial gains with statistical significance in word identification and spelling,** with effect sizes indicating medium to large improvements across various literacy measures.
- **Significant gains were observed across students from diverse backgrounds,** including those receiving free or reduced lunch, those with IEPs, and ELLs. Further, these gains were comparable to those of their peers, effectively **narrowing achievement gaps in core literacy skills of word recognition, spelling, and word reading fluency**. This suggests that Just Words is an effective and viable intervention for Tier 2 support for those populations.
- While exploratory analyses suggested that **higher implementation quality** (as indicated by how often and how many Just Words units were taught) **correlated with better student outcomes**, the variability in implementation levels and challenges in linking student performance to specific teachers limited definitive conclusions. Further, teachers reported internal school-based barriers in fully implementing the program, underscoring the need for consistent training and ongoing support at the school and district levels.

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- **Students in MA schools where Just Words implementation was high** (i.e., number of minutes exceeded 225 minutes of instruction and students received instruction through Unit 9 or above) **significantly outperformed students with low implementation** (<225 minutes, instruction up to Unit 8 or below), with more students meeting or exceeding expectations on the MCAS, the state test. Similarly, a significantly higher percentage of students in high implementation groups were at or above the 50th percentile on the STAR ELA than students in the low implementation groups.
- Surveys indicated **high levels of satisfaction with and strong support for the Just Words program**, **with teachers and administrators both reporting notable improvements in student literacy skills**. However, both teachers and administrators expressed a desire for more comprehensive training and ongoing support to enhance program implementation and effectiveness.

Teachers shared:

"Just Words helps students read and write better in all their classes, especially in ELA."

"Students sustained growth + skills that they can implement in other classes and real world."

Administrators said:

"The students' foundational skills in decoding and encoding were significantly improved. The skills were applied to a variety of different settings."

"We saw an increase in our iReady scores in students enrolled in Just Words. Students were engaged and follow along in their core classes better."

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EFFECTIVNESS STUDY IN URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

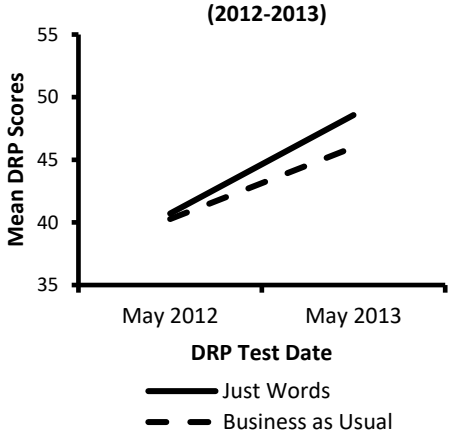
Wilson Language Training partnered with an urban district to provide comprehensive professional learning to support the implementation of Just Words with integrity and sustainability. As part of these efforts, an effectiveness study of student response to Just Words instruction was conducted in two middle schools in the district to understand the program's real-world impact on students' literacy achievement.

The goal of the effectivness study was to test if Just Words instruction produced larger gains in reading comprehension than the instruction that the schools had been using prior to implementing Just Words. To achieve this goal, gains in reading comprehension made by 7th grade students receiving Just Words instruction were compared with the gains made by their peers not receiving Just Words instruction (i.e., were instead receiving instruction as usual).

Students attending both middle schools were tested using the Degree of Reading Power® reading assessment (DRP) in spring 2012 and then again in spring 2013. The DRP provides a holistic, criterion-referenced measure of how well students understand text of increasing complexity.

Figure 2 illustrates the progress made by students in Middle School 1 (MS 1) receiving Just Words compared to students receiving instruction as usual. When tested in spring 2012, 54 of the 7th grade students attending MS 1 were classified as severely at risk based on their DRP scores. Of these students, 17 were assigned to receive Just Words instruction, completing less than half of the curriculum (6 of the 14 Just Words Units) by the end of the year. The remaining 37 students classified as severely at risk were assigned to receive instruction as usual.

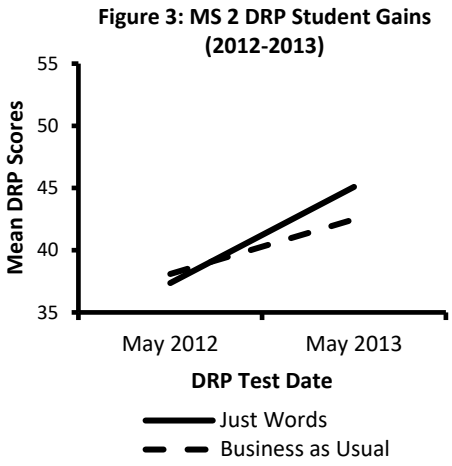
Figure 2: MS 1 DRP Student Gains (2012-2013)



In this controlled study, students who received Just Words made greater gains than students receiving instruction as usual. When retested in May 2013, less than 30% of Just Words students were still classified as severely at risk. In contrast, over 50% of the students who received instruction as usual were still classified as severely at risk.

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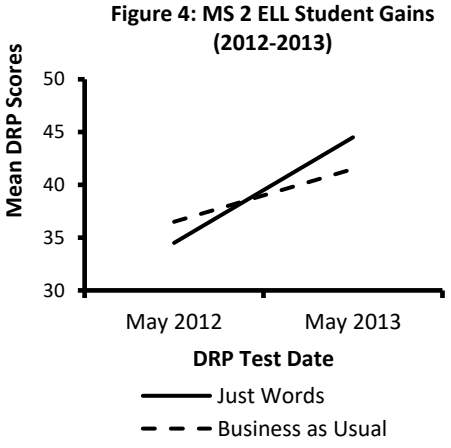
Figure 3 illustrates the progress of students in Middle School 2 (MS 2). At the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year, 32 of the 7th grade students attending MS 2 were classified as severely at risk based on their May 2012 DRP scores. Of these students, 11 received Just Words instruction, completing half of the curriculum (7 of 14 units) by the end of the year, and 21 received instruction as usual.



Students who received Just Words instruction made larger gains, and by May 2013, only 45% of students receiving Just Words instruction were classified as severely at risk. In contrast, 80% of the students who received instruction as usual were still classified as severely at risk.

Addressing the needs of English Language Learners

A large population of English language learners (ELL) attend MS 2, allowing contrasts to be made between ELL students with moderate word-level reading deficits who received Just Words instruction and ELL students who received instruction as usual. While all ELL students scored higher on the DRP test administered in spring 2013, ELL students who received Just Words instruction made greater gains than ELL students who received instruction as usual (see Figure 4).



Conclusions

Student data from two urban middle schools demonstrated Just Words instruction to be more effective at improving the reading comprehension of students with moderate word-level reading deficits than the instruction that was being used in these schools prior to the introduction of Just Words (i.e., instruction as usual). In addition, ELL students who experienced moderate word-level reading deficits made greater gains in reading comprehension in response to Just Words than instruction as usual.

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EFFECTIVENESS STUDY IN AN URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Wilson partnered with an urban elementary school to perform a real-world effectiveness study of Just Words to address two questions:

1. Does Just Words instruction improve the oral reading fluency of 4th and 5th grade students with moderate word-level reading deficits?
2. Does Just Words instruction improve the oral reading fluency of ELL students with moderate word-level deficits?

The oral reading fluency of 29 students receiving Just Words instruction was measured at the beginning and middle of the school year using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a set of standardized, nationally norm-referenced assessments of literacy skills. Of these students, 17 were native English speakers and 12 were English Language Learners (ELL). A comparison group of students not receiving Just Words instruction was not available for this study.

Question 1 Results: Improving Oral Reading Fluency

Fourth and fifth grade students receiving Just Words instruction made statistically significant gains on the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency measure (DORF) of number of words read correctly in one minute on grade level passages. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the progress made by Just Words students from the beginning of the year (BOY) to the middle of the year (MOY).

Figure 5: Words Correct

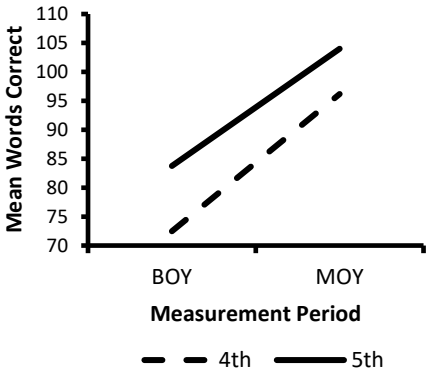
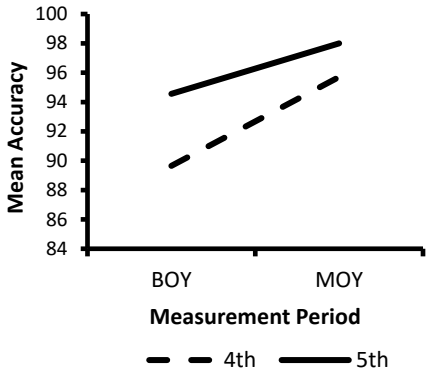


Figure 6: Accuracy



Question 2 Results: Addressing the Needs of English Language Learners

ELL students made statistically significant gains in both the number of words read correctly and reading accuracy during the first semester they received Just Words instruction. Moreover, the gains made by ELL students were equivalent to those made by native English-speaking students for both the number of words read correctly and reading accuracy. As illustrated in Figures 7 and

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8, 4th and 5th grade ELLs made significant gains from the beginning to the middle of the year in the number of words they correctly read, and the gains made by ELL students were equivalent to those made by native English-speaking students. The same was true of the gains made by 4th and 5th grade ELL students in their oral reading accuracy as depicted in Figures 9 and 10.

Figure 7: 4th Grade Words Correct

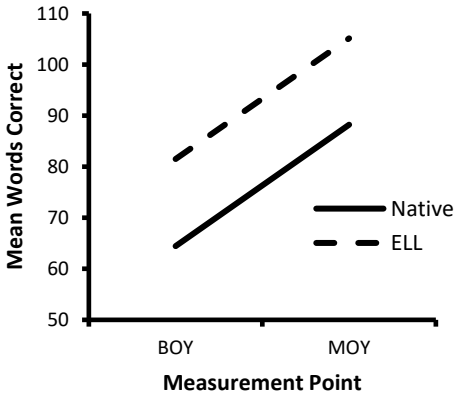


Figure 8: 5th Grade Words Correct

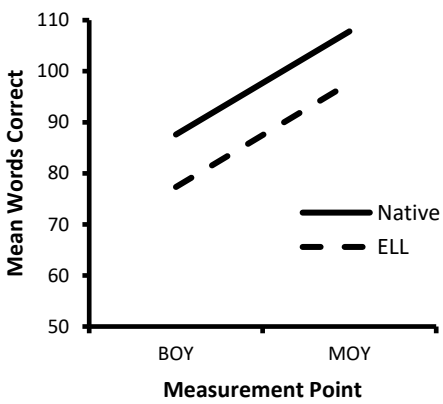


Figure 9: 4th Grade Oral Reading Accuracy

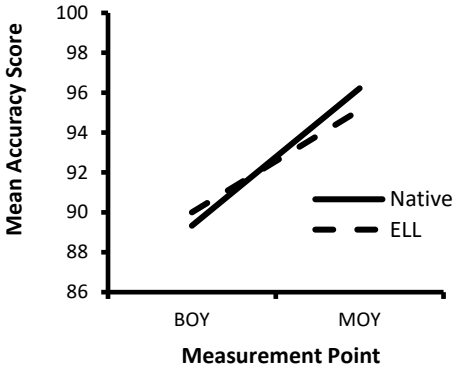
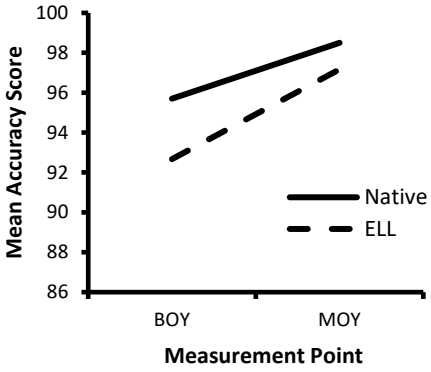


Figure 10: 5th Grade Oral Reading Accuracy



Conclusions

On average, 4th and 5th grade students with moderate word-level reading deficits made significant gains in oral reading fluency after receiving a semester of Just Words instruction. Additionally, ELL students with moderate word-level reading deficits made significant gains in number of words read correctly and oral reading accuracy after receiving a semester of Just Words instruction. Additionally, gains made by ELL students were equivalent to the gains made by their native English-speaking peers.

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EFFECTIVENESS STUDY IN A SMALL RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

Through an independent analysis of assessment results from 24 sixth and seventh grade students enrolled in the Just Words program for three semesters in a small rural middle school in Illinois beginning in fall 2013 through the following fall of 2014, a measurable increase was identified. There was a significant increase in the mean grade equivalent score for these students on word recognition and nonsense word decoding measures and in the mean percentile rank in these areas.

- Mean grade equivalent in word recognition for these sixth and seventh graders rose from an average of 4.2 to an average of 6.2, an increase of two grade levels.
- The average student's ability to recognize words in isolation improved by two full grade levels in three semesters (KTEA-II Letter and Word Recognition Subtest comprised mostly of irregular words).
- The average student's ability to decode words improved 3.4 grade levels in three semesters (KTEA-II Nonsense Word Decoding Subtest).

The table below describes the mean grade equivalency for these sixth and seventh graders at the start of Just Words in fall 2013 and at the end of fall 2014 on selected measures:

	Average grade level equivalency		**Average growth**
	Sept 2013	**Dec 2014**	
Mean grade equivalency *Word Recognition*	4.2	6.2	+2.0 grade levels
Mean grade equivalency *Nonsense word decoding*	3.1	6.5	+3.4 grade levels
Mean Percentile Rank *Word Recognition*	18%	32%	+14 percentage points
Mean Percentile Rank *Nonsense word decoding*	16%	42%	+26 percentage points
Mean Percentile Rank *Decoding Composite*	14%	34%	+20 percentage points

Conclusions

On average, these sixth and seventh grade students made substantial and meaningful gains in word recognition and nonsense word decoding that reduced the gap with their grade-level peers after three semesters of instruction. Students with a wide range of starting scores made significant gains.

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