Investing in Innovation in South Dakota

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In October 2010, the USDE awarded a 5-year, $45.6 million Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to The Ohio State University.[1] An additional $9.1 million required private sector match was also raised to support Reading Recovery training across the United States. All university training centers in the U.S. are participating in the project. These funds are supporting professional development for more than 3,690 new teachers who will reach nearly half a million children by 2015, the final year of the grant.

Although all U.S. schools are eligible for the professional development funding provided by the i3 grant, particular priority is given to very low-performing schools, schools in rural areas, and schools with high populations of English language learners. This article features the impact of the i3 grant on two rural school districts in South Dakota.

[1] The i3 Reading Recovery scale-up grant was awarded to J. D'Agostino, E. Rodgers, & P. L. Scharer in 2010 by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement (Award No: GRT00020690, $45,593,146, and additional $9,148,663 in required matching funds).

The consequences of long-term literacy difficulties are both dire and immense. Irrefutably, children who fail to develop reading skills are woefully ill prepared for a success-driven market that demands a highly literate work force. Acknowledging the negative impact of these individuals on society, the federal government sought to expand successful interventions in the United States through the Investing in Innovation grant program. Scale-up grants were intended to expand the implementation of research-proven highly successful programs in our nation's schools.

Fortunately for rural schools in South Dakota, Reading Recovery was identified as one of four proven interventions. At the time of the award, the status of school budgets in South Dakota was reflective of the situation experienced by schools in other states. Federal and state funding cutbacks had forced schools to reduce staff and eliminate programs in an effort to balance budgets. Salaries were frozen. Districts reduced or eliminated funding for travel to conferences. Funding to support the training and professional development in many schools disappeared or was dramatically reduced.

As a consequence of the dire financial circumstances, training new Reading Recovery teachers became an unrealistic option for many districts with strong histories of supporting Reading Recovery — districts like Yankton and Mitchell. These communities are similar in many ways. Each is situated in rural South Dakota with a population of around 15,000. The poverty rate in each community is around 11%; 95% of the population is White and about 2% of the population is American Indian. Each district had a history of Reading Recovery and wanted to continue the implementation, despite challenging budget contexts and the need to train Reading Recovery teachers.

> Clearly the i3 grant has provided a needed support for districts that are committed to providing high-quality Reading Recovery intervention for children most in need.

Administrators and teachers recognized the benefits of providing children with high-quality individualized Reading Recovery lessons. "I belong to one of the largest school districts in South Dakota, and I am the principal of an elementary school with nearly seventy percent of the students receiving free and reduced-price lunches," Mitchell Principal Joe Childs said. "This year, just as in the past, our school will start the new year in August. And, just like in the past, we will have a handful of students that don't have the reading skills necessary for success. Who's to blame for a faulty start — parents that don't value education, transient

Newly trained teacher Kelli Simonsen talks about a favorite book with Jasmine Gill before beginning her lessson. The Yankton teacher says the i3 grant has allowed her to gain a deeper appreciation for Reading Recovery.

families, and a teacher that doesn't understand every student? The question, 'Who's to blame,' is the wrong question! The right question: How will these students, the ones with a faulty start, succeed academically? The right answer is Reading Recovery!"

Yankton Principal Melanie Ryken reflected that, "the Yankton School District was fortunate to train Reading Recovery teachers in the 1998–99 school year. These teachers taught in the four elementary schools for approximately 13 years and were funded with Title I funds. Their training was paid for with a combination of Title I and general fund monies when the state was not in a deficit spending pattern. Some of the trained teachers were nearing retirement age and some had moved out of the district. Due to limited funding, our program was in jeopardy, specifically in the area of training a new round of teachers."

Fortunately for both districts the i3 scale-up grant prioritized schools with a high need of increased teacher expertise to include those schools in rural areas. After learning about the i3 grant opportunities, both districts realized the benefits and applied for funding. According to Principal Ryken, "This grant was exciting for us because it would enable a new crop of teachers to be trained in addition to receiving some new teaching materials such as books and other items. We applied for the grant, and we were ecstatic when we received notification that the application was accepted."

In the summer of 2011, both districts sent teachers to The University of South Dakota Reading Recovery Training Center for training—four from Mitchell and six from Yankton.

"For our school district, the avenue for success was paved by the i3 grant," Principal Childs said. "The grant has afforded our school district the opportunity to train more Reading Recovery teachers, provide these teachers with continued professional development, and equip each of them with the tools necessary for achieving their goal of dramatically reducing the number of struggling first-grade readers." Principal Ryken noted, "The collaboration with the university was fabulous and the integration with other surrounding communities allowed for good networking. This training was all due to the i3 grant; without this grant, none of these teachers would have received training due to limited funds in our school's budget."

Those Reading Recovery-trained teachers are now splitting duties between Reading Recovery and Title I. Each teaches daily individual lessons to 4 or 5 Reading Recovery students and works the other part of the day teaching 15 to 30 Title I children in small groups.

"We, as teachers, strive to teach our students to be lifelong learners," said Kelli Simonsen, a newly trained Reading Recovery teacher from Yankton. "The i3 grant has given us the opportunity to continue to be lifelong learners in our careers. The grant allowed teachers to be trained in the program with little expense to the district. We have found a new understanding and a deeper appreciation for Reading Recovery. The significance of the intervention in these young readers' lives is truly invaluable."

Mitchell Reading Recovery teachers Audra Bormann, Nancy Boyd, Deb Dice, and Danielle Leighton

all remember the consistent weekly training and the gains in confidence as they shared ideas and learned from each other, especially in the behind-the-glass training class sessions.

"The i3 grant gave me the opportunity to grow as a professional," added Yankton teacher Jenny Kapla. "I was able to learn new ways to teach children who are struggling to read. It allowed me to work while I was training and put to use what I was learning. Reading Recovery is valuable to any school and to every student who has the opportunity to benefit from it."

Clearly the i3 grant has provided a needed support for districts that are committed to providing high-quality Reading Recovery intervention for children most in need. "The i3 grant means that we will immediately reduce the number of struggling first-grade readers," Principal Childs said. "It means that these students will move on without additional support, greatly reducing the cost of their education. It means that these students will have an opportunity to read to siblings. And, it means that these students may grow up valuing education. Our district has been given a gift — more teachers have been Reading Recovery trained. Our teachers have been given an opportunity to get the professional development necessary for reducing the number of struggling readers. Our current students have been blessed, and we have hope for our future students."

Principal Ryken agreed. "Without the grant our program would have suffered; with this grant, we feel as if we are thriving again as a district," she said.

About the Author

Garreth Zalud is a professor and Reading Recovery trainer at the University of South Dakota. He is chair of the division of curriculum and instruction and teaches graduate courses in reading education.

About the Cover

Jasmine Mai loves drawing and is a very talented artist. She also loves to read and write and especially likes fairy tales and princesses. Jasmine entered first grade reading at an average level. But as time went on, she began to fall behind in her reading and writing and made very little progress. Her teacher, Lori Edwards, recommended her for Reading Recovery in January of her first-grade year. Jasmine began her lessons as a second-entry student, and was reading above grade level when her lessons were discontinued after just 12 weeks. Roberta Heidorf, her second-grade teacher, says Jasmine has a very positive attitude towards school, is reading on grade level, and loves to write in the classroom.

Her family shares that Jasmine is a very happy child who is always willing to help her mom do things around the house and help take care of her brother and sister. Jasmine enjoys making funny videos with her older sister, Tammeka, who was also a Reading Recovery student. She also loves school, her teacher, and enjoys playing with her friends.