Investing in Innovation: Voices from Kansas

Annie Opat, Emporia State University

In October 2010, the USDE awarded a 5-year, $45.6 million Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to The Ohio State University. 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 four rural school districts in Kansas and was compiled by Annie Opat, Reading Recovery trainer at Emporia State University in Emporia, KS.

Rural school districts offer unique implementation challenges that include geographic distances, high transportation costs and travel time, a small population base, and the need for flexible staffing. Kansas educators understand these challenges first-hand because the majority of school districts (158 of 286) are considered rural under the federal definition of the Small Rural School Achievement program.

The Investing in Innovations grant has allowed a number of Kansas school districts to train new Reading Recovery teachers and teacher leaders. Here, educators from four school districts talk about the impact and benefits of having i3-trained Reading Recovery teachers.

Plainville Public Schools

Approximately 2,500 people reside in Plainville. Of the 411 students enrolled in the district, 50% are considered economically disadvantaged.

Matthew Whitney, principal at Plainville Elementary, has seen several benefits since beginning Reading Recovery 2 years ago. “Children who were formerly very low are now reading on grade level after Reading Recovery lessons,” Whitney said. “The parents are really happy with their children’s progress. I also appreciated all of the materials that were available to my teachers through the i3 grant.”

Jackie Ralph, a Reading Recovery teacher trained with i3 funds said, “I see huge benefits. For example, one student who came to our school with limited kindergarten attendance was very low. Reading Recovery not only helped him in literacy but also improved his focus in school. Last year he was at the top of his second-grade reading class and reading at the fourth-grade level.”

Hays School District

Mark Hauptman, assistant superintendent and Reading Recovery site coordinator, has appreciated i3 funding and the opportunity to expand Reading Recovery training at Hays and in nearby school districts. Two of the 12 Reading Recovery teachers were trained with i3 funds. “Reading Recovery has been a very positive program in our district for 18 years,” Hauptman said. “It is a proven intervention that develops lifelong reading strategies in our most at-risk readers at the first-grade level. This prevents these readers from falling into a failure cycle at the earliest level of reading instruction.”
Hauptman contends that Reading Recovery is part of the district’s success, as 97% of all students have been meeting the state’s reading standards for many years. “Reading Recovery is the BEST teachers along with the BEST training that helps the MOST needy students,” Hauptman said.

Otis-Bison School District
The Otis-Bison school district is one of the new additions to the Hays Reading Recovery training site, thanks to the federal i3 grant. Approximately 200 children (K–12) are students in the district that encompasses many miles of land. It is not uncommon for students to travel by bus for at least an hour each way to school.

Holly Strommenger, an i3-trained Reading Recovery teacher and a Title I reading teacher, trained 2 years ago and continues to work with children who struggle in learning to read and write. At first, other teachers in the district questioned her training and weekly class attendance. As time progressed and as they saw the positive effects of Reading Recovery—how children enjoyed reading and were able to catch up to their peers—teachers in the district began to appreciate the value of Reading Recovery training.

First-grade teacher Chelsea Pechanec noted, “Reading Recovery helped students recognize that they can read and write themselves once they worked with Holly. After Reading Recovery, they were no longer a below-average reader.”

Reading Elementary in the North Lyon County School District
Reading Elementary School is one of two elementary schools in the consolidated district of North Lyon County. In the small city of only 231 residents, 70% of the students were identified as economically disadvantaged, and 9% of the students represent children of racially diverse populations.

First-grade teacher Millicent Phillips is the Reading Recovery teacher for her small school. The i3 grant helped fund her training. Flexible staffing allows her to teach Reading Recovery lessons while paraprofessionals oversee learning center activities in an adjoining room.

When Teacher Leader Suzanne DeWeese observes Phillips during school visits, she sees Reading Recovery instructional practices and language integrated into classroom instruction and in Reading Recovery lessons. “Reading Recovery’s powerful impact is clear after a district trains a teacher and observes the literacy gains of its most struggling students,” DeWeese said. “The trained teachers often become literacy leaders in their buildings.”