



Joyful Readers Evaluation Report

Year One: Context, Implementation, and Outcomes

Prepared for the William Penn Foundation by Research for Action

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Overview

Research for Action conducted a mixed-methods evaluation of Joyful Readers in the 2022-23 school year.

The Program. Joyful Readers is a high-dosage tutoring program that recruits and trains AmeriCorps members to provide daily, in-school tutoring support.

Participation. In the 2022-23 year, the program served nine schools within four districts and 536 students. Students received an average of 31 hours of tutoring.

Implementation. The program offered a rigorous and individualized environment for participating students and provided high-quality, tailored supports for tutors.

Outcomes. Program outcomes are promising. On average, Joyful Readers students made sizeable gains towards the national median in reading. Joyful Readers average gain of 8 percentile points on reading assessments represents more than a year's worth of reading growth.

Recommendations. Research for Action's recommendations for continued growth included providing additional, hands-on instructional practice for tutors and exploring more opportunities for communication with families.

Introduction

The lifelong benefits of early literacy are well known, and there is a growing understanding of the most effective strategies to boost reading skills (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). However, the persistently low literacy rates in Philadelphia suggest a need for more focused learning on literacy interventions within the city. In a context of persistently underfunded schools with a history of failed education reforms (Royal, 2022), Philadelphia 4th grade reading achievement rates have remained largely stagnant over the past twenty years (NCES, 2022), and Philadelphia 4th graders underperform in reading compared to other large cities in the United States (NCES, 2022).

In this context, new and innovative programs have an opportunity to fill crucial gaps in schools to support struggling readers. The following evaluation report summarizes results from the efforts of one such program, Joyful Readers' high-dosage tutoring model.

Joyful Readers is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that leverages the AmeriCorps program to provide small-group, in-school tutoring to students. The organization recruits and trains full-time AmeriCorps members to serve as tutors and partners with schools to identify students in need of tutoring. This report presents Research for Action's (RFA) findings from a one-year evaluation of Joyful Readers' high-dosage literacy tutoring program in nine Philadelphia schools in four Philadelphia school districts (public and charter) in the 2022-23 school year.

The evaluation has the following aims:

1. Describe the program approach and its theory of change.
2. Summarize program implementation, including successes and challenges.
3. Collect and analyze literacy outcome data for program participants.
4. Offer recommendations to support future program implementation.

This report is the first in a series of two. This Year 1 report focuses on understanding the scope of the program and describing program implementation. In the Year 2 report, RFA plans to further define the program's theory of change, refine and evaluate program outcome goals, and capture how the program evolved in its second year to meet the needs of students and schools. RFA will evaluate outcomes longitudinally and further triangulate the connection between program implementation practices and program outcomes.

Evaluation Approach

RFA took a mixed-methods and culturally responsive approach to this evaluation, employing both quantitative and qualitative data collection to paint a comprehensive yet nuanced picture of the program's implementation, participation, and outcomes. Further, RFA evaluators completed training in culturally responsive methods in preparation for the completion of this evaluation. Culturally responsive approaches included being responsive to needs that arose from program leaders and participants. This included co-creation of evaluation components with programs (such as the program theory of change) and incorporating feedback from program staff on the elements of the evaluation report. RFA evaluators also evaluated the program through a culturally responsive lens, which included incorporating resources on culturally responsive education into the evaluation frameworks.

Joyful Readers Approach and Theory of Change

Program Description

The Joyful Readers program provided 30-minute pull-out tutoring sessions during the school day for K-3 youth. The tutoring sessions were led by AmeriCorps members who Joyful Readers recruited for a one-year, full-time commitment. Prior to placement, AmeriCorps staff received a one-month training in September. Each school was assigned 1-5 tutors and each tutor led 11 pairs of youth daily. Ongoing tutor training during the program included a partnership with the AIM Institute for Learning and Research to train tutors in the Science of Reading as well as weekly observations and coaching provided by Joyful Readers literacy coaches. Participating schools were responsible for appointing a program liaison, collaborating with Joyful Readers to schedule the tutoring during the school day, using assessment data to determine tutor caseloads, and partnering on progress monitoring and caseload changes throughout the year. In the 2022-2023 school year, Joyful Readers served 536 youth.

Evaluation Theory of Change

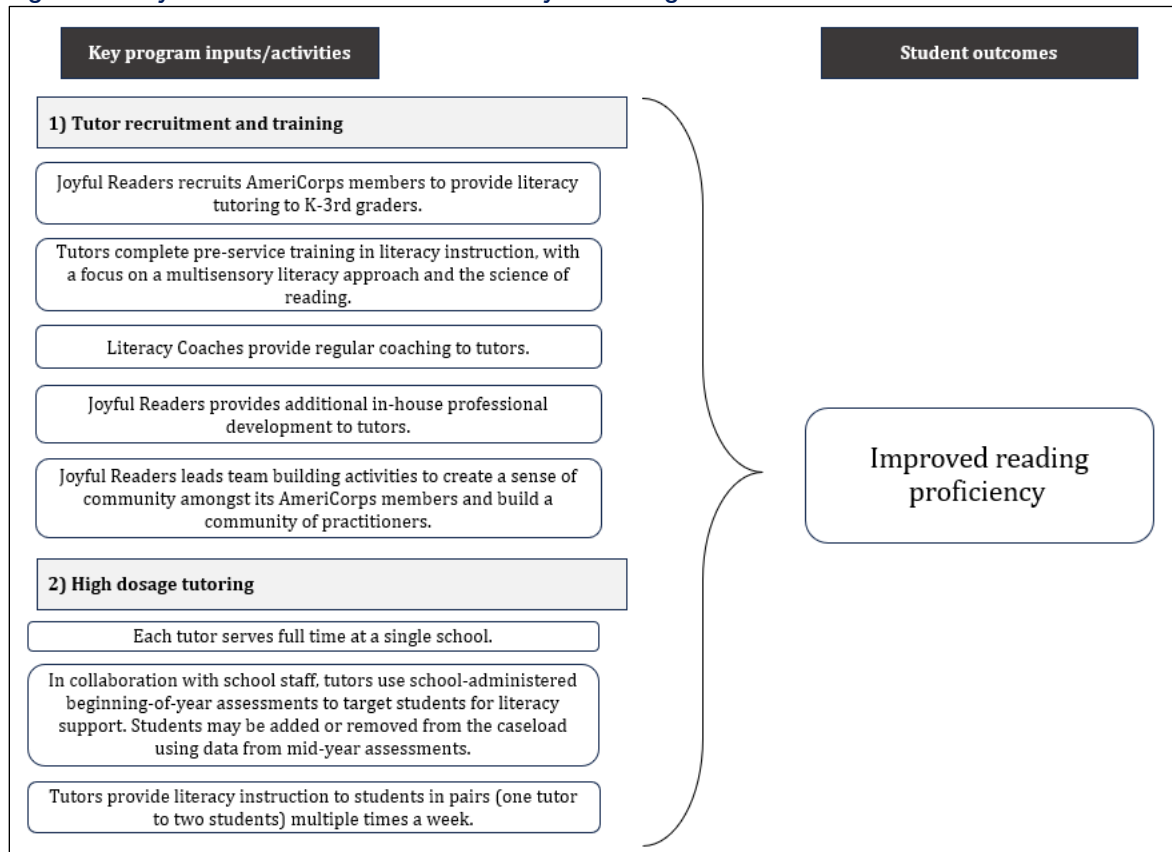
In partnership with Joyful Readers leaders, RFA co-developed the following Theory of Change for the program. The Theory of Change outlines the key program components and how they connect to student outcomes. This Theory of Change is intended to provide a high-level snapshot of the essential elements of the program and does not capture all the efforts of the program throughout the year.

Joyful Readers focuses on two main program activities: 1) recruiting and training AmeriCorps tutors and 2) providing high-dosage tutoring to students. Training tutors consists of a pre-service training focusing on the Science of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021), as well as ongoing coaching and professional development throughout the school year. The program also provides team-building opportunities for tutors to build a connected cohort of literacy practitioners.

The high-dosage tutoring model is focused on providing regular and consistent literacy tutoring for K-3 students. Tutors are assigned to each school and tutors work with students in pairs for 30 minutes per day, five days per week (excluding holidays and occasional school events, such as testing, assemblies, and field trips). To identify student participants in the program, Joyful Readers works with school personnel and leverages school-administered reading assessments. Tutoring caseloads can be flexible and are subject to change based on mid-year assessments and school input.

The Joyful Readers' theory of change posits that when highly trained AmeriCorps tutors provide high-dosage tutoring support to students identified based on need, student reading proficiency will improve.

Figure 1. Joyful Readers' Evaluation Theory of Change



Evidence Based Practices Framework

Joyful Readers embedded at least 18 evidence-based practices into the program model. RFA generated an evidence-based literacy practices framework based on practices with strong evidence of impact from What Works Clearinghouse, a national clearinghouse that compiles evidence-based practices in education, in addition to other sources. All sources included in the table can be found in the References section of the report. In collaboration with program leaders, RFA identified the primary evidence-based practices embedded in Joyful Readers' program model by reviewing program documentation and two rounds of input from Joyful Readers program leaders. We then observed the program to document evidence of the implementation of promising practices (see section "Promising Practices and Potential Barriers").

Table 1. Evidence-Based Practices in Joyful Readers Program Model

Practice	Practice Category	Source*
Prepare literacy program staff with pre-service training .	Staff training	Research for Action
Support literacy program staff with ongoing training and support .	Staff training	Research for Action
Provide staff training on how to best support English Learner (EL) students .	Staff training	Research for Action
Provide literacy expertise by having access to a literacy expert , either on staff or from an external source.	Staff training	Research for Action
Screen all students for potential reading problems at the beginning of the intervention.	Assessment and progress monitoring	What Works Clearinghouse
Monitor the progress of struggling students, using grade appropriate measures.	Assessment and progress monitoring	What Works Clearinghouse
Develop awareness of the segments of sound in speech and how they link to letters . <i>Typically practiced in grades K-2.</i>	Phonics and decoding	What Works Clearinghouse
Teach students to decode words , analyze word parts, and write and recognize words.	Phonics and decoding	What Works Clearinghouse
Select texts purposefully to support comprehension development (for example, selecting texts to support a specific skill or selecting texts that are appropriate for students' reading progress).	Comprehension	What Works Clearinghouse/ Research for Action
Teach students to use reading comprehension strategies such as questioning, visualizing, monitoring and clarifying, drawing inferences, and summarizing/retelling.	Comprehension	What Works Clearinghouse
Provide introductory and concentrated instruction on foundational learning skills in small groups to struggling students.	Differentiation	What Works Clearinghouse / J-PAL Evidence Review
Provide time for differentiated reading instruction based on assessments of students' current reading progress.	Differentiation	What Works Clearinghouse
Provide high-dosage tutoring with three or more sessions per week or intensive, week-long small-group programs.	Differentiation	EdResearch for Recovery
Limit small group size to one to four students per tutor or instructor .	Differentiation	EdResearch for Recovery
Align program content with the local school day curricula to enhance in-school learning.	Curricular alignment	Research for Action
Cultivate students' identities with texts and lessons that allow students to see themselves in their learning and build their own identities.	Cultural responsiveness and relevance	Culturally responsive literacy framework

Practice	Practice Category	Source*
Facilitate positive tutor-student relationships and build a stronger understanding of students' learning needs by ensuring students have a consistent tutor over time.	Climate	EdResearch for Recovery
Establish an engaging and motivating context in which to teach reading comprehension.	Climate	What Works Clearinghouse

*See References section for all sources, organized by author last name

Joyful Readers Participation

Joyful Readers served **536 K-3rd grade students across nine schools within four districts:** the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), Belmont Charter Network, Mastery Charter Network, and String Theory Schools.

Participation by grade level varied by school context, largely because schools provided input about which students would participate in the program and school prioritized different grade levels for inclusion. **Overall, Joyful Readers served 9% kindergarteners, 31% 1st graders, 33% 2nd graders, and 27% 3rd graders.** Table 2 displays program participation by grade level and school.

Table 2. Joyful Readers Participation: Number of Students by School and Grade Level

Grade	School District of Philadelphia			Belmont Charter Network			Mastery Charter Network		String Theory	Total	%
	Childs	McClure	Moffet	Belmont Academy	Belmont	Inquiry	Clymer	Smedley	PPACS		
K	8	7	0	29	0	0	4	0	0	48	9
1 st	10	22	27	0	7	2	14	38	48	168	31
2 nd	10	20	23	0	25	27	27	0	45	178	33
3 rd	5	0	6	0	20	16	23	46	27	142	27
Total	33	49	56	29	52	45	68	84	120	536	100

Students in the program received an average of 31 hours of tutoring. About 85% of students received more than 15 hours of tutoring and 21% of students received more than 45 hours of tutoring. Participation ranged from 0.5 hours to 62.8 hours of tutoring (not shown).



Table 3. Hours of Joyful Readers Tutoring

Hours of tutoring	# Students	% Students
<15 hours	80	14.9
15-29.9 hours	147	27.4
30-44.9 hours	197	36.8
45+ hours	112	20.9
Total	536	100

Joyful Readers Tutor Professional Development

Tutors. Joyful Readers recruited 24 AmeriCorps members to serve as tutors. Of these, 19 remained in the program all year. Two tutors completed training but did not get placed in schools, two exited early in fall 2022 after starting in their schools and one exited early in March 2023.

Training. All tutors participated in a pre-service training academy for a total of 19 days. A typical day was 7 hours of training. The total typical training time per tutor was 133 hours, including formal training on instruction, student relationships, school partnerships, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as well as HR onboarding and team building. By the end of the pre-service training, tutors had completed about two-thirds of the AIM Institute Pathways to Proficient Reading course. This course is an introduction to the Science of Reading designed for educators. Tutors completed the remaining 20 hours of the course between October and December.

Joyful Readers also hosted 4 training days for tutors throughout the year. These sessions were a mix of formal training on instructional practices, community building, and planning for tutors' post-service plans. Coaching was typically provided to tutors weekly throughout the school year, with slightly more coaching earlier in the year and slightly less later in the year.

Joyful Readers Implementation Snapshot

RFA collected qualitative data in the form of interviews and program observations to identify successes and challenges in early program implementation.

Interviews. RFA conducted four interviews with program instructors and two interviews with school leaders with the aim of understanding instructor perspectives on program training and delivery. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 25 and 45 minutes.

Observations. RFA also performed four program observations with the aim of understanding program implementation in action. Observation data were analyzed using an RFA-developed tool that adapted elements from three frameworks: 1) the Weikart Center's Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), 2) Gholdy Muhammad's Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy, and 3) The Danielson Group's Framework for Teaching (2022). The YPQA measures instructional quality outside of formal school settings, the Equity Framework provides best practices for culturally responsive pedagogy, and the Framework for Teaching offers a framework for instructional best practices in a standard school day environment.

In combination, these tools permitted the research team to consider program observations from multiple angles as they worked to identify promising program practices and potential barriers to program success.

Program Observations: The Science of Reading in Action

Observation Context. Observations took place in two charter schools, Clymer Elementary School and Inquiry Charter School. Clymer Elementary is located in North Philadelphia and Inquiry Charter School is located in West Philadelphia. The facilities available to tutors and their pupils varied by school, based on what was available in the building. At one school, Joyful Readers had a designated room for instruction, whereas at the other observed school, the session space was in a designated part of the hallway. At both schools, the Joyful Readers spaces featured sufficient furniture for tutors and students, displays that included posters and student work, as well as a whiteboard.

Tutoring Session Activities. The program activities observed by the evaluation team directly reflect reading instruction best practices as they are understood by the Science of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Activities included explicit instruction in phonological awareness, word recognition, decoding, fluency, and syntax. The activities were also multisensory (primarily using sight, sound, touch, and movement), which observers noted fostered high engagement from students. Examples of the activities observed are listed below in Table 4.

Table 4. Description of Tutoring Session Activities Observed

Activity	Description
Glue sounds	The instructor read “glue sounds” (e.g. “ng” or “nk”) flash cards letter by letter and then sounded out the sounds, then youth repeated it back to instructor.
Marking words	Youth marked the word on the board, instructor provided guidance and then allowed youth to work on their own.
Syllable practice	Youth pointed to the basic keywords with a wand and the instructor pronounced them. Next, the instructor took the wand and then had the youth pronounce the sounds.
Writing	Instructor told youth to write a word at the top of the notebook page and then produce a sentence.
Trick words	The instructor showed flashcards of “trick words” and had youth pronounce the words.

Promising Practices and Potential Barriers

RFA researchers drew from both observation data and interview data to identify practices that might facilitate or might pose challenges to program implementation. In the following tables, we identify promising practices we observed or heard about during interviews (Table 5) as well as potential barriers (Table 6). Supporting evidence is offered to substantiate each claim. Many of the observed practices relate closely to the evidence-based practices described above in Table 1, but because some of the evidence-based practices are difficult to observe (such as the alignment of the program to the school curriculum), the promising practices below do not directly address the presence of all evidence-based practices that are embedded in the program.

A promising practice is a practice that directly or indirectly facilitates program implementation as outlined in the program’s Evaluation Theory of Change. Joyful Readers demonstrated many promising practices that reflected strong program implementation. For example, Joyful Readers provided highly individualized support for students. Joyful Readers also provided sufficient high-quality training and coaching for instructors (or tutors) to ensure that they felt prepared to lead tutoring sessions.

Table 5. Promising Practices Identified in RFA’s Year 1 Evaluation of Joyful Readers

Promising practice	Supporting evidence
<p>1. Instructors created a warm, supportive, and respectful climate.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors used positive affect (smiles, laughter, positive attitude) to cultivate a positive environment. • Observed instructors demonstrated a sense of community and camaraderie: youth and instructors knew each other well. • Observed instructors engaged in some informal conversation before the session to build relationships with youth. For example, the observed instructor talked with youth about their lunch for the day and what they brought with them to the lesson. • Observed instructors were particularly skilled at acknowledging the individual personal ideas/contributions of youth and seamlessly transitioning back into the lesson. For example, youth took the lesson on a tangent about a vampire picture, and the instructor patiently explained what a vampire was, permitted brief back-and-forth, and then moved quickly along with the lesson.
<p>2. Instructors provided youth with a high level of support through real time differentiated assistance for youth’s reading levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 2:1 student-instructor format appeared to facilitate frequent and individualized attention for youth. • Throughout the observed lesson the instructor did not provide the answers but instead offered youth multiple prompts. Instructors increased support until youth arrived at the correct answers themselves.
<p>3. Instructors appreciated the benefits of receiving support and resources from Joyful Readers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors noted that Joyful Readers invited speakers to provide instructors with career ideas and career options. • Instructors enjoyed the benefits of receiving Joyful Readers’ resources to help them in their instruction, like Teachers-Pay-Teachers, as well as professional career development resources, like LinkedIn consulting.
<p>4. The instructors met regularly with literacy coaches for support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors felt that the frequency of interactions (once a week) with their literacy coaches was the right amount.
<p>5. Joyful Reader’s training prepared instructors for programming with youth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite not knowing what to expect when first starting the program, instructors found Joyful Readers’ training prepared them for their instructor role.
<p>6. Instructors viewed positive relationship development and literacy progress as successes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors noted that seeing youth move up into a higher grade and getting to their reading grade level was a measure of success. • For some instructors, Joyful Readers was the “most rewarding” job they had so far. Sometimes they felt the role “draining,” but seeing youth improve their reading, “conversation, and their self-confidence” is rewarding.
<p>7. Joyful Readers literacy lessons were multisensory.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observed components of the lesson comprised of auditory, visual, and movement-related modalities and phonics instruction (i.e., letter cards and word cards with pictures). • Observed youth were encouraged by instructors to use their hands to “tap it out” when they struggled with a word. Youth had personal whiteboards where they were asked to write words. Youth also led the class using the vowel sheet, and they were sometimes allowed to use the “pointer” to lead the class.

Promising practice	Supporting evidence
8. Observed youth showed enthusiasm about the lesson's content.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observed youth stayed on task most of the time. There were observed moments of joy and connection, including youth smiling and laughing when they got an answer right. Youth appeared to enjoy the choices allowed to them, such as choosing the color marker they wanted. Youth competed for points they received based on their literacy practice to win a stuffed animal – they really liked this activity and were excited to play.

Note: Evidence of promising practices and potential barriers was generated through interviews with program staff and school leaders, as well as RFA observations of program activities.

Potential barriers to implementation surfaced primarily during interviews with program staff and school leaders. Potential barriers are defined as any circumstance that might pose a challenge to program implementation as defined by the program's Evaluation Theory of Change. Some potential barriers may be outside of the program's control but are still worth noting in order to capture the program context.

Table 6. Potential Barriers for Continued Growth Identified in RFA's Year 1 Evaluation of Joyful Readers

Potential barrier	Supporting evidence
1. Two instructors found aspects of their instructor role to be difficult including finding their <i>voice</i> and <i>presence</i> in the classroom, staying organized with lesson plans, materials, and schedules.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructors noted that developing their “teacher voice” and “finding yourself in the classroom” were challenges. An instructor said that learning those components was helpful both in and out of the classroom. Staying organized with lesson plans, materials, and schedules were listed as challenges instructors encountered when they first started Joyful Readers. Learning classroom management skills and how to communicate with the youth were also challenges, but the literacy coach provided support in those areas.
2. Youth seemed to have limited choices and agency during the lesson.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observed youth had limited choices during the lesson. They could choose the color of their markers, for example. However, otherwise, the phonics lesson was not conducive to youth expression or choice.
3. There appeared to be limited critical thinking questions for youth (few to no open-ended questions) during the lesson.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most questions asked by instructors were close-ended (for example, the instructor asks if a word should be lowercase or uppercase).

Note: Evidence of promising practices and potential barriers was generated through interviews with program staff and school leaders, as well as RFA observations of program activities.

Student Outcomes

RFA collected reading assessment outcome data for participating students and performed descriptive analyses of student growth between fall 2022 and spring 2023. All assessments are school-administered. Schools used the following assessments to measure reading progress: MAP Foundational Skills, MAP Oral Reading, Star Reading, Star Early Literacy, and Star Curriculum Based Measures (CBM) Reading. All assessments measure reading proficiency, but they use different measurement approaches and assess different reading constructs.

Reading Assessment Analysis Approach

In the following analysis, RFA uses the percentile ranks associated with students' reading assessment scores to capture the average performance of Joyful Readers students across different assessments. Because each assessment uses a different scale to assess reading proficiency, assessment scores are not directly comparable. The percentile ranks for each student are provided by the assessment publishers alongside students' raw scores. Most assessments administered to Joyful Readers students provided percentile ranks. The only exceptions are Star CBM Reading and MAP Oral Reading. Raw assessment scores separated by assessment type, including Star CBM reading growth, are available in the Appendix (Tables 9, 10, 11, and 12). No students took MAP Oral Reading in both fall and spring, so MAP Oral Reading growth is not presented.

To determine the reference group for each assessment's published percentiles RFA contacted assessment publishers and referenced assessment technical manuals (NWEA, 2022; Renaissance Learning, 2023a; Renaissance Learning, 2023b). For the MAP Foundational Skills assessment, the reference group for percentiles is all students who took the MAP Foundation Skills assessment in the same year (2022-23). The assessment publisher, NWEA, notes that the reference group used to generate percentiles for MAP Foundational Skills is not nationally representative due to geographic and sample size limitations (NWEA, 2022). This means that MAP percentiles presented here are referencing all students who took the assessment in the same year, but they cannot be considered a comparison to a nationally normed sample. NWEA does not provide any demographic information about the reference sample, and so MAP percentiles should be interpreted with caution. For the Star Reading and Star Early Literacy assessments, the percentile reference group refers to a nationally representative cohort of assessment takers in the 2018-19 school year (Renaissance Learning, 2023a; Renaissance Learning, 2023b). Renaissance Learning prefers to use pre-COVID-19 scores as a reference group. However, this means that for both Star Reading and Star Early Literacy, student scores are not being compared to students in the same year, nor to students who experienced pandemic-related learning loss. For this reason, it is possible that Star percentile ranks are an underestimate of student performance relative to their peers; if 2022-23 scores are deflated overall compared to 2018-19, then the 2022-23 percentile ranks based on 2018-19 scores would be artificially low.

There are limitations to relying on percentiles to describe growth. One such limitation is that percentile growth does not have a linear relationship to score growth; smaller differences in assessment score result in larger percentile differences towards the middle of the assessment score distribution. In this case, Joyful Readers students largely began the school year towards the lower end of the score distribution, which means their percentile growth is smaller than it might have been had they begun closer to the middle of the distribution, even with the same change in raw score. Additionally, percentile growth does not demonstrate what specific reading skills that



students grow in. Because each assessment measures different reading constructs (e.g. phonological awareness, fluency) in different ways, comparing percentile growth across assessments captures only general reading improvement, which is measured differently depending on the assessment. Another limitation is that the percentiles presented here do *not* make claims of program impact in comparison to a demographically similar group of nonparticipating students. Instead, the percentiles help demonstrate how students in the program performed in reading during the year compared to other students who took the same assessment. Future evaluations should use a known comparison group that is demonstrably similar to the intervention group to assess the impact on Joyful Readers students relative to their peers.

Assessment Completion

RFA analyzed reading outcomes for those students who completed the same assessment in both the fall and spring if that assessment provided percentile ranks in addition to assessment scores. These criteria applied to 316/ 536 students (59%) in the program. Table 7 shows the assessment types administered to students by their respective schools. The rows highlighted in green show the groups included in the analysis. The assessment type was determined by the school, including in cases where multiple assessments were available at the same school (e.g. Star Reading and Star Early Literacy).

Some students took a more challenging assessment in the spring than they had in the fall. For example, 17 students moved from MAP Foundational Skills in the fall to MAP Oral Reading in the spring and 4 students moved from Star Early Literacy in the fall to Star Reading in the spring. The advancement to a more challenging assessment between fall and spring can be considered a type of reading growth. However, in such cases, the growth is difficult to summarize quantitatively because the assessment metrics are not comparable from fall to spring. These students are not included in the following analysis of reading outcomes but should be considered to have shown reading improvement in the 2022-23 school year.

About a third of students (177/536) were missing a fall assessment score, spring assessment score, or both scores from the school-provided data.

Table 7. Number of Students by Assessment Type and Inclusion in Outcomes Analysis

Type	Fall Assessment	Spring Assessment	Students (#)	Included in Analysis
MAP	Foundational Skills	Foundational Skills	77	Yes , provides percentiles and comparable fall to spring
MAP	Foundational Skills	Oral Reading	17	No , not comparable fall to spring
Star	Star Reading	Star Reading	112	Yes , provides percentiles and comparable fall to spring
Star	Star Early Literacy	Star Early Literacy	127	Yes , provides percentiles and comparable fall to spring
Star	Star CBM Reading	Star CBM Reading	22	No , no percentiles provided
Star	Star Early Literacy	Star Reading Spring	4	No , not comparable fall to spring

Type	Fall Assessment	Spring Assessment	Students (#)	Included in Analysis
	Total students with fall and spring assessments		359	
	Missing fall and/or spring assessments		177	



Student Reading Growth by Program Participation

Joyful Readers students ended the year closer to the median reading performance than when they began.

In the 2022-23 program year, Joyful Readers students' reading growth outpaced the growth that would be expected in a typical school year. Students not only improved in reading, but also made meaningful progress towards closing the gap between their assessment scores and the national median score of students in the same grade between fall to spring. Joyful Readers students began the school year reading at the 22nd percentile, and they ended the year at the 30th percentile. **This movement toward the national median, or gain of 8 percentile points, represents more than a year's worth of growth.** Further, there is reason to believe that Joyful Readers' gains might be even more pronounced in an evaluation that compared Joyful Readers students to similar Philadelphia students. The average Philadelphia school demonstrates less reading growth than schools nationally or even schools in large comparable large, urban cities (NCES, 2022). Keeping this in mind, there may be an even larger difference between the performance of Joyful Readers students and their peers in the same context than there is between Joyful Readers students and national reading performance. Future evaluations should explore the performance of Joyful Readers students in comparison to a matched group of similar, nonparticipating students.

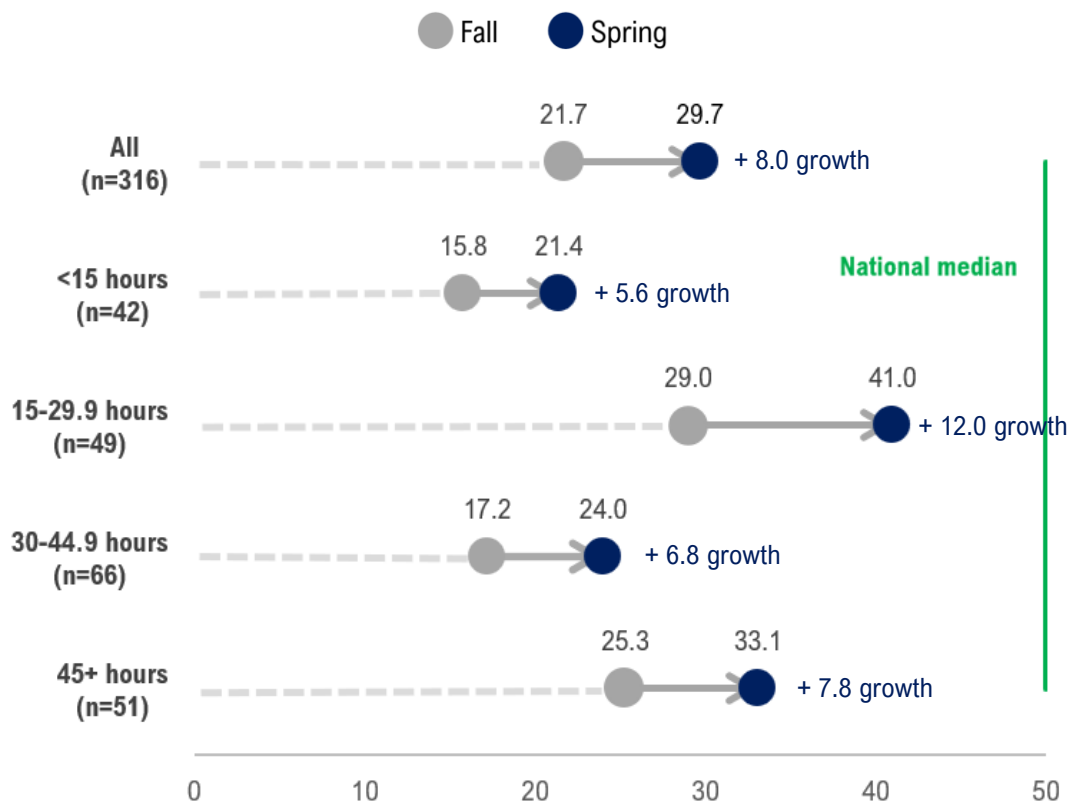
Despite substantial improvements in reading proficiency, students on average started and ended the year below the national median. Considering the context of low literacy performance in Philadelphia, this is not unique to the program or the schools it supports and should not necessarily be considered as a reflection of their performance (NCES, 2022). However, this does speak to the critical need for intensive literacy support in the contexts where the program is implemented.

On average, students in all dosage categories grew more in reading than a typical student in the same grade. Students who received between 15-29.9 hours of tutoring performed particularly well (+12 percentile points).

For any tutoring program and particularly a new program like Joyful Readers, it is important to understand the relationship between dosage (the number of hours of tutoring students participate in) and student reading performance. Figure 2 examines Joyful Readers' reading progress by hours of tutoring received. RFA compared the growth of students who attended the program for fewer than 15 hours, 15-29.9 hours, 30-44.9 hours, and more than 45 hours. Students in all categories made progress toward the national median. Students who attended the program fewer than 15 hours grew the least, showing an improvement of 5.6 percentile points. Students who attended 15-29.9 hours grew the most, improving by 12 percentile points. Students who attended 30-44.9 hours grew 6.8 percentile points and students who received 45 or more hours of tutoring grew 7.8 percentile points. Future evaluations could explore the particularly strong improvement of students who participated in 15-29.9 hours of tutoring.



Figure 2. Average Reading Percentile by Hours of Program Participation¹ Compared to National Median, Fall 2022 to Spring 2023



Student Reading Growth by School

School context can be an important factor in the implementation of any program. To explore the associations with school context, RFA disaggregated student reading growth by school. Note that Belmont Academy is not included in this analysis because all students at Belmont Academy took the Star CBM Reading assessment, which does not provide percentile ranks. To see growth on the Star CBM Reading, see Table 12 in the Appendix.

Joyful Readers students began the year at vastly different levels of reading proficiency depending on the school they attended.

Figure 3 displays the average reading assessment percentile by school. Joyful Readers schools started the year with dramatically different reading performance compared to the national median. Joyful Readers students at all schools started the year below the national median, but some schools started the year relatively close to the median while others started well below the median.

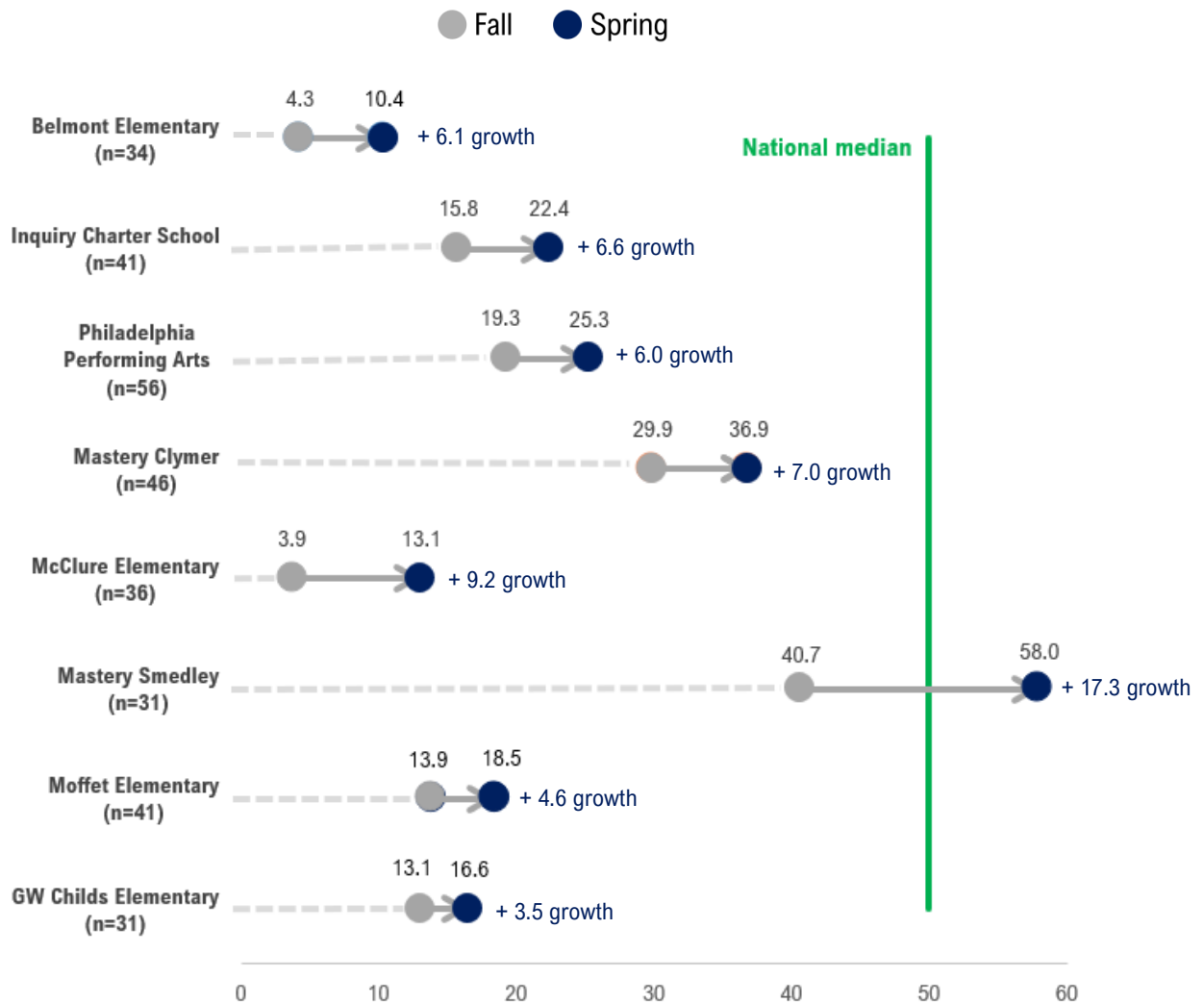
¹ Participation data excludes students in the School District of Philadelphia, which provided deidentified data that could not be linked to participation data.

Depending on the school, Joyful Readers students ranged from beginning the school year at the 3.9th percentile to the 40.7th percentile.

On average, Joyful Readers students at all schools experienced above-average reading growth, but some schools saw more pronounced growth than others.

Joyful Readers students at Mastery Smedley experienced the highest reading growth compared to other schools at an impressive 17.3 percentile points of growth. Excitingly, this growth launched Joyful Readers students at Mastery Smedley to the 58th percentile, above the national median. Joyful Readers students at Philadelphia G.W. Childs Elementary demonstrated the smallest growth compared to other schools (3.5 percentile points of growth).

3. Average Reading Percentile Growth by School Compared to National Median, Fall 2022 to Spring 2023



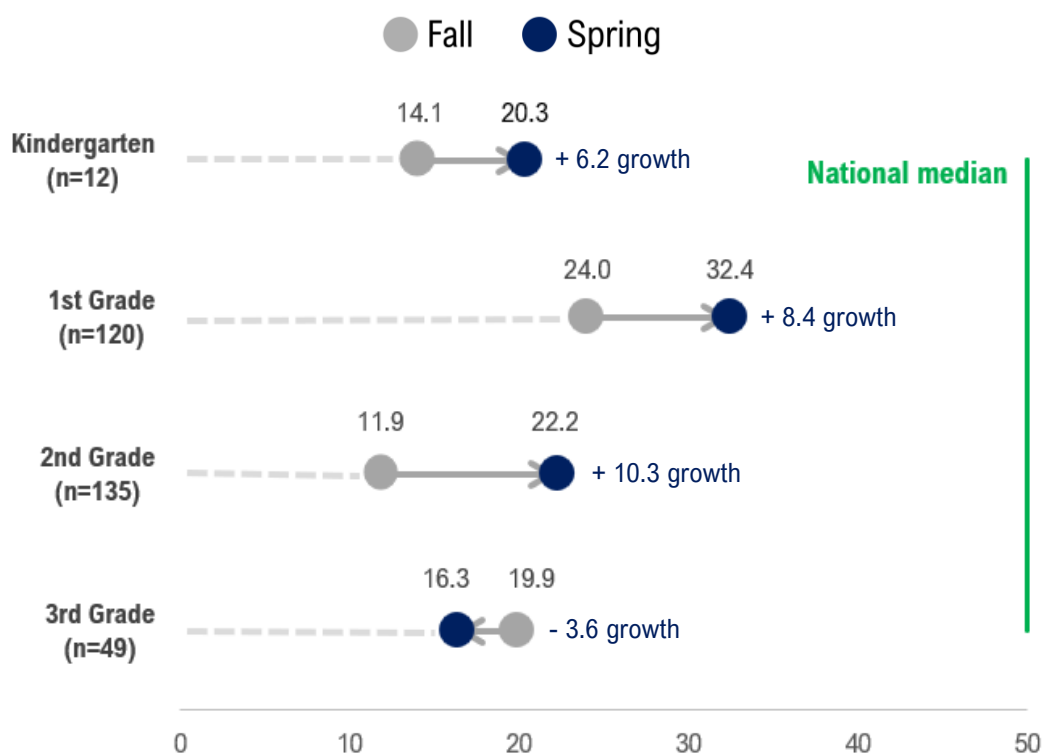
Student Reading Growth by Grade

Finally, RFA explored the connection between student grade level and reading growth. Figure 4 breaks down Joyful Readers reading growth by grade level.

Second graders experience the greatest reading gains, followed by first graders.

Second graders in the Joyful Readers program saw large gains relative to national average reading scores. Second graders grew an average of 10.3 percentile points over the course of the year. First graders showed an improvement of 8.4 percentile points on average. Third graders were the only subgroup in this analysis to lose progress relative to their peers; third graders lost 3.6 percentile points between fall and spring.

Figure 4. Average Reading Percentile Growth by Grade Compared to National Average, Fall 2022 to Spring 2023



Recommendations

In the following table, RFA presents recommendations for continued growth for the program based on program interviews, observations, and student outcomes analysis. It should be noted that the program collected and analyzed their own data, feedback about the program from instructors. With that opportunity for earlier self-reflection, Joyful Readers may already be implementing many of these recommendations this 2023-24 program year.

Table 8. Recommendations for Continued Growth in the Joyful Readers Program

Recommendation	Supporting evidence
<p>1. Hands-on training may provide instructors with additional opportunities to prepare for Joyful Readers sessions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors received feedback from literacy coaches during the instructional year, but instructors believed that having hands-on training to practice before Joyful Readers started would be beneficial. • Instructors suggested that Joyful Readers training could include shadowing teachers or assisting teachers in the classroom. Additionally, classroom management could be useful for instructors with minimal teaching experience.
<p>2. Instructors may benefit from learning about the learning/educational background of their youth before instruction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors recommended that in addition to the training time used to observe teachers, it might be helpful to have time to meet and talk with each teacher to discuss youth, their backgrounds, and what they need help with.
<p>3. Information about youth engagement with literacy at their homes may help instructors support youth during Joyful Readers lessons.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors were curious about how youth engaged with literacy at home.
<p>4. Communication between families and instructors may help Joyful Readers support youth during sessions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors reported that notifying families about their child's tutoring sessions would reinforce the importance of the lessons to the youth and update parents when youth do well.
<p>5. Considering the strong performance of Joyful Readers students using assessment-provided percentile data, Joyful Readers should pursue a study that compares the performance of Joyful Readers students to similar, Philadelphia students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on the descriptive analyses conducted by RFA, Joyful Readers students demonstrated accelerated growth over and above national averages. This exciting performance suggests that Joyful Readers should pursue a more rigorous evaluation that compares the performance of Joyful Readers to a group of nonparticipating students with similar characteristics.

Questions/Feedback

For additional information about this report, please contact Dr. Kendall LaParo at Research for Action at klaparo@researchforaction.org.

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Appendix

Table 9. Fall to Spring MAP Foundational Skills Phonological Awareness Growth Compared to Assessment Averages, 2022-23

Grade	Joyful Readers			National Average		
	Joyful Readers Mean Fall Domain Score	Mean Joyful Readers Spring Domain Score	Joyful Readers Growth (Points)	National Mean Fall Domain Score*	National Mean Spring Domain Score*	National Growth (Points)
Kindergarten (n=4)	482	493.5	+11.5	490.9	497.4	+6.5
1 st Grade (n=40)	494.5	504.1	+9.6	498.9	502.4	+3.5
2 nd Grade (n=21)	495.7	504.9	+9.2	503.6	503.2	-0.3
3 rd Grade (n=12)	504.3	501.4	-2.8	504.1	504.7	+0.6
All (n=77)	495.7	503.3	+7.6	n/a	n/a	n/a

*Means provided by NWEA's 2022 MAP technical manual (Appendix, Table 13). Means represent the performance of all students nationally who took the assessment in the same year, but are not nationally representative of all students in a given grade.

Table 10. Fall to Spring Star Reading Growth Compared to National Averages, 2022-23

Grade	Joyful Readers			National Average		
	Joyful Readers Mean Fall Score	Mean Joyful Readers Spring Score	Joyful Readers Growth (Points)	National Mean Fall Score*	National Mean Spring Score*	National Growth (Points)
2 nd Grade (n=76)	765.9	863.9	+97.9	886	939	+53
3 rd Grade (n=36)	816.3	860.8	+44.5	952	987	+35
All (n=104)	782.1	862.9	+80.8	n/a	n/a	n/a

*National means provided by Renaissance Learning's 2023 technical manual (Appendix, Table 14). National means represent national mean performance, not grade level benchmarks.

Table 11. Fall to Spring Star Early Literacy Growth Compared to National Averages, 2022-23

Grade	Joyful Readers			National Average		
	Joyful Readers Mean Fall Domain Score	Mean Joyful Readers Spring Domain Score	Joyful Readers Growth (Points)	National Mean Fall Domain Score*	National Mean Spring Domain Score*	National Growth (Points)
Kindergarten (n=8)	608.3	661.3	+53.0	529	680	+151
1 st Grade (n=80)	641.8	737.9	+96.2	644	761	+117
2 nd Grade (n=38)	726.3	790.3	+64.0	781	833	+52
3 rd Grade (n=1)	676.0	756.0	+80	827	852	+27

*National means provided by Renaissance Learning's 2023 technical manual (Appendix, Table 15). National means represent national mean performance, not grade level benchmarks.

Table 12. Fall to Spring Star CBM Reading Growth, 2022-23

Grade	Fall Joyful Readers Mean Correct Per Minute	Spring Joyful Readers Mean Correct Per Minute	Joyful Readers Growth	N
Letter Sounds	3.2	25.2	+22	21
Expressive Nonsense Words	0	0	+0	1
Phoneme Segmentation	0.5	1	+0.5	4
Passage Oral Reading	66.1	92.4	+26.3	16

Note: National averages are not available for this assessment. This table includes all students with both a fall and spring Star CBM Reading Assessment in the same skill (e.g. Letter Sounds), including those who also took another assessment, such as Star Reading.



Table 13. National Descriptive Statistics for MAP Phonological Awareness Scales Scores (SS) – Foundation Skills Assessment (Table 6.8 in MAP Reading Fluency 2022 Technical Manual)

Grade	Fall 2020					Winter 2021					Spring 2021				
	N	SS		SEM		N	SS		SEM		N	SS		SEM	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Phonological Awareness															
K	75,412	490.94	9.25	2.70	0.93	70,260	494.36	9.44	2.67	0.88	95,166	497.38	9.87	2.76	0.95
1	91,393	498.90	9.16	2.84	1.01	72,632	501.34	9.58	2.95	1.10	73,659	502.42	9.79	3.02	1.18
2	61,536	503.57	8.94	3.14	1.21	35,068	503.53	9.32	3.13	1.23	32,973	503.24	9.56	3.11	1.24
3	13,442	504.10	8.89	3.24	1.27	9,175	504.93	9.14	3.29	1.32	7,674	504.72	9.59	3.28	1.35
4	844	506.62	9.19	3.27	1.26	547	507.42	9.40	3.36	1.41	503	507.93	9.93	3.50	1.53
5	337	507.51	10.01	3.35	1.31	320	508.26	8.71	3.44	1.49	237	508.36	10.22	3.41	1.41

Table 14. National Descriptive Statistics for Star Reading Assessment Unified Scale Scores (Table 54 in Star Reading 2023 Technical Manual)

Grade	Fall Unified Scaled Scores				Spring Unified Scaled Scores			
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median
K	219,980	702	65	702	204,950	795	69	794
1	373,300	774	76	766	247,430	856	74	856
2	563,280	886	74	888	325,560	939	70	944
3	566,780	952	69	958	351,450	987	68	990
4	624,810	995	66	1,000	341,290	1,021	67	1,024
5	502,860	1,033	66	1,038	264,970	1,056	67	1,060
6	340,390	1,065	65	1,070	161,650	1,086	68	1,090
7	213,030	1,088	68	1,092	102,030	1,105	70	1,108
8	175,210	1,111	69	1,116	61,530	1,127	72	1,130
9	57,120	1,129	71	1,134	41,130	1,138	69	1,144
10	67,800	1,139	69	1,146	33,110	1,144	70	1,152
11	38,420	1,144	71	1,152	11,710	1,149	70	1,158
12	23,420	1,153	72	1,162	4,510	1,156	72	1,164

Table 15. National Descriptive Statistics for Star Early Literacy Assessment Scale Scores (Table 37 in Star Early Literacy 2023 Technical Manual)

Grade	Fall Star Early Literacy Scaled Scores				Spring Star Early Literacy Scaled Scores			
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median
Pre-K	11,470	446	85	430	15,930	567	115	554
K	219,980	529	100	520	204,950	680	103	688
1	373,300	644	114	638	247,430	761	91	782
2	563,280	781	91	806	325,560	833	66	852
3	566,780	827	70	850	351,450	852	55	867