MATHEMATICA Policy Research

CaseSTUDY

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Uplift Education: **How Can We Use the Coach to Evaluate Non-Tech Initiatives in our Schools?**

Uplift Education Charter Schools

Location:
Dallas/Forth Worth, Texas

Number of schools:
37

Number of students:
About 16,000

Student population:
66% Hispanic or Latino
20% Black
8% Asian
5% White
1% Other
74% economically disadvantaged

Uplift Education, a charter network in Texas, is dedicated to using data to make decisions that will improve teaching and learning. The district data analytics team includes 11 full-time staff members who work on a range of data and research tasks such as building dashboards, coaching teachers on data use, and producing reports on the effectiveness of programs. In these reports, the team often visually compared the average test score of students who participated in a program with the average test score of other students in the district who did not participate in the program.

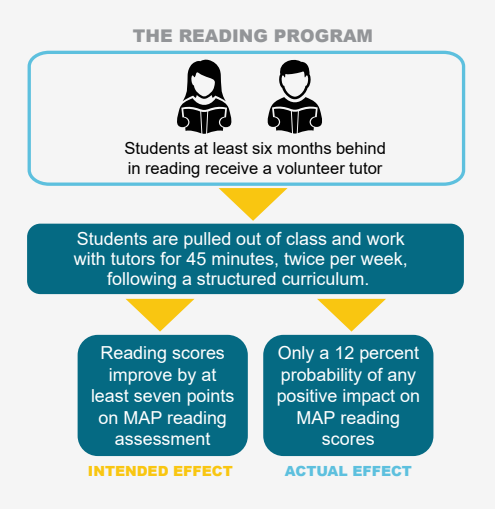
In early 2017, Uplift decided to test the use of the Ed Tech Rapid Cycle Evaluation Coach to conduct more robust analyses of programs' effectiveness. The data team conducted an evaluation of a math software as a trial run. The team found the "tool to be extremely useful" and immediately realized that the Coach would be just as valuable for evaluating non-tech initiatives.

The first non-tech initiative that Uplift evaluated was a reading intervention that matches students who are six months or more behind in reading with adult volunteers from the community. The volunteers are trained to provide one-on-one reading instruction using a structured curriculum. Students are pulled out of class to receive the reading intervention. At Uplift schools, the tutoring was expected to be administered twice a week during the school day for 45 minutes a session.

THE INITIATIVE

Kim Lammers, a data analyst at Uplift, also served as a reading volunteer for a 2nd-grade student in the district. Lammers noticed that her 2nd-grade partner was not progressing as much as she had hoped. She wondered whether other students had the same experience. Three schools were implementing the program, and as a former classroom teacher, Lammers felt an urgency to determine whether the reading intervention was effective. As Lammers described, "When you have a 2nd grader who can't read, you don't have the luxury of time."

Lammers proposed to her team that they examine whether the reading intervention was having its intended effect on students' reading scores. Having successfully completed the evaluation of the math software, the team decided to try to use the Coach to evaluate the impact of the reading intervention.



> Lammers emphasized that "the intended use of the program was to intervene with the lowest-performing scholars" to improve their reading. "The intended outcome wasn't being met, so we discontinued the program in our schools."

To make the investment in the reading program worthwhile, the district wanted to see an improvement of at least seven points on the MAP reading assessment, administered halfway through the school year in winter 2017. Lammers used the Coach matching tool to match 2nd-grade students participating in the reading program with similar students who did not participate.

Uplift found that there was a 0 percent probability that the reading program increased students' academic achievement by seven test score points. There was only a 12 percent probability that the intervention increased students' achievement by more than zero test score points. The results confirmed Lammers' fear that the reading program was not having the desired effect on student reading achievement.

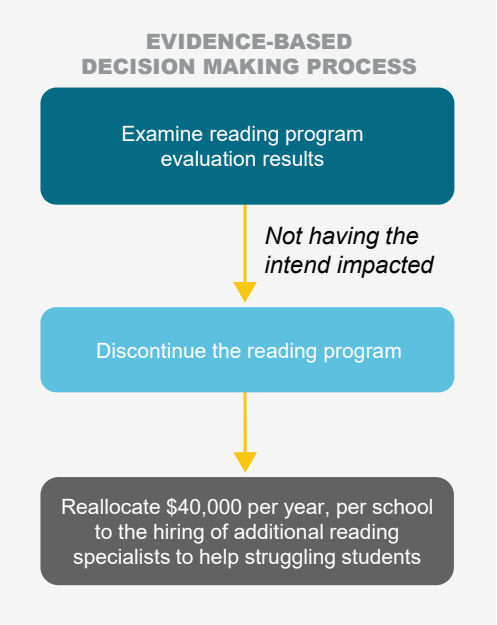
> Conduct your own rapid cycle evaluation at edtechrce.org.

THE WAY FORWARD

Lammers shared the evaluation results with her team and district leaders. "When I shared this report with top leaders in the district, they were really receptive," she said. Lammers added that it is "neat to work for a school district that wants to make decisions based on empirical evidence."

Based on the results of the evaluation, two Uplift primary schools decided to end the use of the reading program in their schools, while the other school decided to keep the program with the intention of looking at the data for another year. Lammers recognized that the one-on-one pull-out approach of the intervention might have benefited students in ways that the evaluation did not examine. For instance, developing personal relationships with caring adults could have increased students' self-confidence. However, Lammers emphasized that "the intended use of the program was to intervene with the lowest-performing scholars" to improve their reading. "The intended outcome wasn't being met, so we discontinued the program in our schools," said Lammers. The small probability of positive impacts of the reading program did not merit the district's large investment in the program.

To provide more effective interventions for struggling readers, Uplift Education reallocated the funds that had paid for the program, about $40,000 per year, per school. It hired additional teacher residents and reading intervention teachers who now provide targeted support to the students who need it the most.



The data team at Uplift will continue to use the Coach to evaluate both tech and non-tech initiatives in their schools. Every data analyst at Uplift has used the Coach to evaluate a program or practice. The data team also noted that the Coach has helped generate more support for rigorous evaluation districtwide.