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Once Early Reading Program: Kindergarten Descriptive Outcomes

Instructional Time and MAP Growth Reading Outcomes in a 2025–26 District Implementation, a South Carolina School District



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Once

EFFICACY STUDY SUMMARY
KINDERGARTEN 2025–2026

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Once is an early-reading program that equips and coaches school support staff to deliver daily, evidence-based, one-on-one, in-person reading instruction to targeted students. The program is designed to be implemented early in students' reading journey to set them up for academic success. Previous research has shown *Once* is particularly effective for students below grade level who complete 80 or more sessions.

STUDY DETAILS

Sample Description

- Sample: 257 Kindergartners in nine elementary schools
- Location: South Carolina
- Implementation
  - Median of 63 instructional sessions (10.1 hours) per student
  - Median delivery rate of 71% of scheduled sessions
  - 23 staff members delivered instruction

Methodology

- Design: Descriptive/correlational (no control group)
  - Outcomes examined by fall and spring MAP achievement quintile
- Assessment Measure:
  - NWEA MAP Growth Reading (fall, midyear, spring)
- Statistical Analysis: Spearman's correlation between achievement and sessions delivered

STUDY CONTEXT

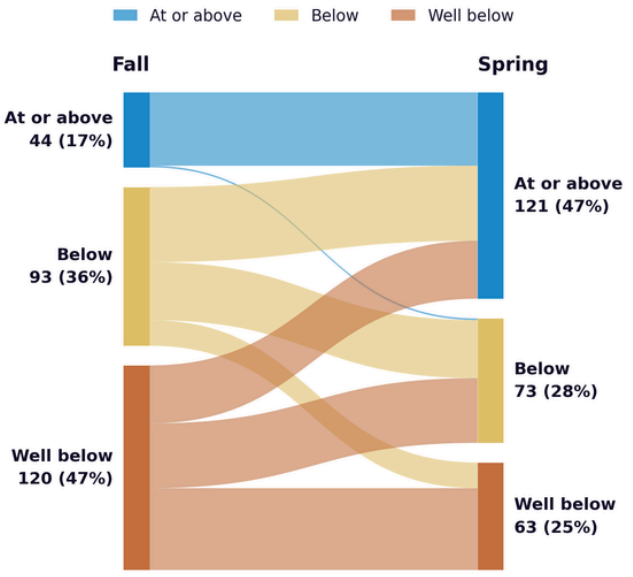
The district in this study is high-poverty, with reading proficiency trailing the state average. Before implementing *Once*, districtwide ELA proficiency stood at about 46%, versus 60% statewide (2025). The district adopted *Once* to intervene, in line with South Carolina's Read to Succeed Act. This report examines 257 kindergartners who received *Once* and had complete fall and spring MAP Growth Reading data.

KEY FINDINGS

The district targeted instruction toward students with the greatest need, and students who received more Once sessions showed larger reading gains.

- At-or-above-benchmark attainment on MAP rose from 17% (fall) to 47% (spring)
- Median national percentile rose from the 21st to the 39th
- **Students who received 80 or more sessions gained +20 percentile points**, versus +8 points for students receiving fewer than 20 sessions.

MAP Benchmark Movement from Fall to Spring



Note: Ribbon color shows each student's fall benchmark level.

STUDY DESIGN

Fall 2025 Students take MAP Growth → Once: 257 Kindergartners Receive *Once* → Spring 2026 Students take MAP Growth → Analysis of Results

Once Early-Reading Program: Kindergarten Descriptive Outcomes

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Conducted by Rachel Schechter, Ph.D. & Paul Macaruso, Ph.D.

LXD Research at Charles River Media Inc.

Abstract

During the 2025–26 school year, a school district in South Carolina implemented *Once,* a one-on-one reading tutoring program, with 257 kindergarten students across nine elementary schools. The students were assessed with NWEA MAP Growth Reading in the fall, midyear and spring. This report documents the reading growth among *Once* students and associations between instructional dosage and outcomes. Results show that the percentage of students reading at or above benchmark rose from 17% in the fall to 47% in the spring, and the median student's standing relative to national norms rose from the 21st to the 39th percentile. The district successfully targeted instruction toward students with the greatest need; students who were furthest from benchmark received roughly twice as much instruction time as students reading at grade level. It was also found that students who received more tutoring sessions demonstrated greater reading growth from fall to spring. These promising results suggest *Once* was an effective part of reading instruction for kindergartners in the participating schools. Recommendations are made to further improve outcomes in future implementations of *Once* in the district.

Keywords: high-dosage tutoring, kindergarten, early literacy, descriptive analysis

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Introduction

Early literacy proficiency is strongly predictive of long-term academic outcomes. Students who are not proficient readers by third grade face substantially higher rates of grade retention, special education referral, and failure to complete high school (Hernandez, 2011). The scale of the national challenge is well documented: the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that only 31% of fourth graders read at or above proficiency, a rate that has not improved since 2005 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Furthermore, kindergarten reading scores are predictive of reaching proficiency by third grade. For example, nationally only 7.2% of students in the bottom 20% at the end of kindergarten reached third-grade reading proficiency (Kuhfeld et al., 2026).

Since publication of the Report of the National Reading Panel (2000), a large body of subsequent research has provided further evidence that systematic instruction in foundational skills tied to phonics is a valuable precursor to effective reading. Explicitly teaching children phonological awareness and letter knowledge results in improved decoding and word recognition (e.g., Foorman et al., 2016; Gersten et al., 2017). By 2026, a majority of states — South Carolina among them — had passed legislation aligned with the science of reading, directing schools toward systematic, explicit instruction in phonological awareness and phonics (Schwartz, 2026). These approaches produce better literacy outcomes than implicit or whole-language instruction, particularly for students at risk of reading difficulty (Ehri, 2014; Rayner et al., 2001). The evidence is commonly organized within theoretical frameworks such as the Simple View of Reading, which identifies word recognition and language comprehension as the two main components of skilled reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). In the early primary grades, the instructional emphasis falls heavily on the word recognition side.

Delivering explicit instruction in word-decoding skills at the scale a district requires is a separate and more difficult problem than knowing what works. One documented approach is to train paraprofessionals and other existing school staff, rather than credentialed reading specialists, to deliver instruction one-on-one. Randomized research has found that phonics-based tutoring delivered by paraprofessionals can produce substantial gains for kindergartners, with effect sizes near 0.80 standard deviations across measures of alphabetics, word reading, and fluency (Vadasy & Sanders, 2010), and comparable gains have been reported for older struggling readers under similar staffing models (Vadasy et al., 2006). The National Student Support Accelerator's design principles for high-impact tutoring — a consistent tutor, delivery during the school day, data-informed instruction, frequent sessions, and standards-aligned materials — are widely cited as features distinguishing effective tutoring from weaker variants (White et al., 2021) and are reflected directly in the design of *Once*.

Prior evaluations of *Once* have repeatedly found that students receiving more instruction show larger gains in reading. Correlational analyses using FastBridge, Aimsweb, and i-Ready

assessments each found that among students reading below grade level, those completing 80 or more sessions made greater gains than those completing fewer sessions (Cleghorn et al., 2025; Jimenez & Schechter, 2024a, 2024b; Jimenez et al., 2025). A quasi-experimental study conducted in a large urban district compared *Once* students who scored below benchmark to a matched group of non-participating peers and found those who completed 80 or more *Once* sessions by the end of the year had greater gains (Hedges' g = 0.46), than students who did not use *Once* (Schechter et al., 2026).

This report examines a South Carolina district's first year of *Once* implementation. It asks four research questions: (1) How much reading growth did kindergartners participating in *Once* show over the year in terms of MAP Growth benchmark criteria? (2) How much reading growth did the participants show over the year in relation to national norms? (3) Was instruction targeted toward students with the greatest need? (4) Did students who received more *Once* instruction show better reading outcomes?

Program Description

Once is an early-reading program that trains, equips, and coaches school support staff to deliver daily, evidence-based, one-on-one, in-person reading instruction to targeted students. Instruction is delivered by a human tutor rather than through a digital platform; the program supplies the scripted lesson sequence, materials, and ongoing coaching required for a paraprofessional or aide to deliver instruction with fidelity. The curriculum comprises a sequence of instructional cycles chained into a single continuing narrative, and each session is video recorded so a *Once* coach can review it and provide feedback. Student progression is mastery-based rather than fixed to a calendar. In this district, 23 staff members delivered *Once* instruction across nine elementary schools during the 2025–26 school year.

Prior research on *Once* has identified approximately 80 sessions as a threshold above which the program shows effectiveness for students reading below grade level. To deliver tutoring at the dosage level a program is designed for is a challenge. In one widely cited, multi-district study of pandemic-recovery tutoring efforts, students intended to receive “high-dosage” tutoring typically received only 12 to 14 hours of instruction on average in districts that had planned to offer 30 to 60 hours (Carbonari et al., 2022); actual delivery often landed between 25% and 50% of what districts had intended. This national context is useful for interpreting this district's own delivery figures, described under Implementation Fidelity below.

Method

Participants and Study Context

The South Carolina school district participating in this study is considered high poverty with reading scores that trail the state average. The district-wide reading proficiency across all grades

stood at approximately 46%, compared to a statewide ELA “meets or exceeds expectations” rate of 60% in 2025 (South Carolina Department of Education, 2025).

The district's adoption of *Once* was driven by internal data showing students falling behind in reading before third grade, and the district wanted to intervene early. The intervention is based on South Carolina's Read to Succeed Act, the state's preschool to grade 12 reading-reform law. Read to Succeed requires kindergarten and first-grade literacy screening three times per year and mandatory science-of-reading training for teachers in kindergarten through grade three. The state aims to have at least 75% of students reading at or above grade level by 2030.

This district uses the NWEA MAP suite — MAP Growth Reading for kindergarten through grade eight and MAP Reading Fluency for kindergarten through grade two — as its required screening tool. Outcomes from the MAP Growth Reading assessment are analyzed in this report. Data are from 257 kindergartners who received the *Once* program during the 2025–26 school year. Each student has a valid fall and spring MAP Growth Reading score and a *Once* usage record. Percentile references are based on NWEA MAP Growth Reading national norms (NWEA, 2020).

Implementation Fidelity

Delivery was meaningful but lighter than *Once*'s intended model, which calls for daily one-on-one sessions. As shown in Table 1 below, the median student received 63 instructional sessions and 10.1 hours of instruction over the school year. The median delivery rate — the share of scheduled sessions delivered — was 71%, which compares favorably to tutoring implementations nationally, where 25% to 50% of planned dosage is common (Carbonari et al., 2022). The practical consequence, however, is that only 16% of kindergartners reached the 80-session threshold that prior *Once* research has associated with effectiveness for students reading below grade level.

Table 1. Once Implementation Summary

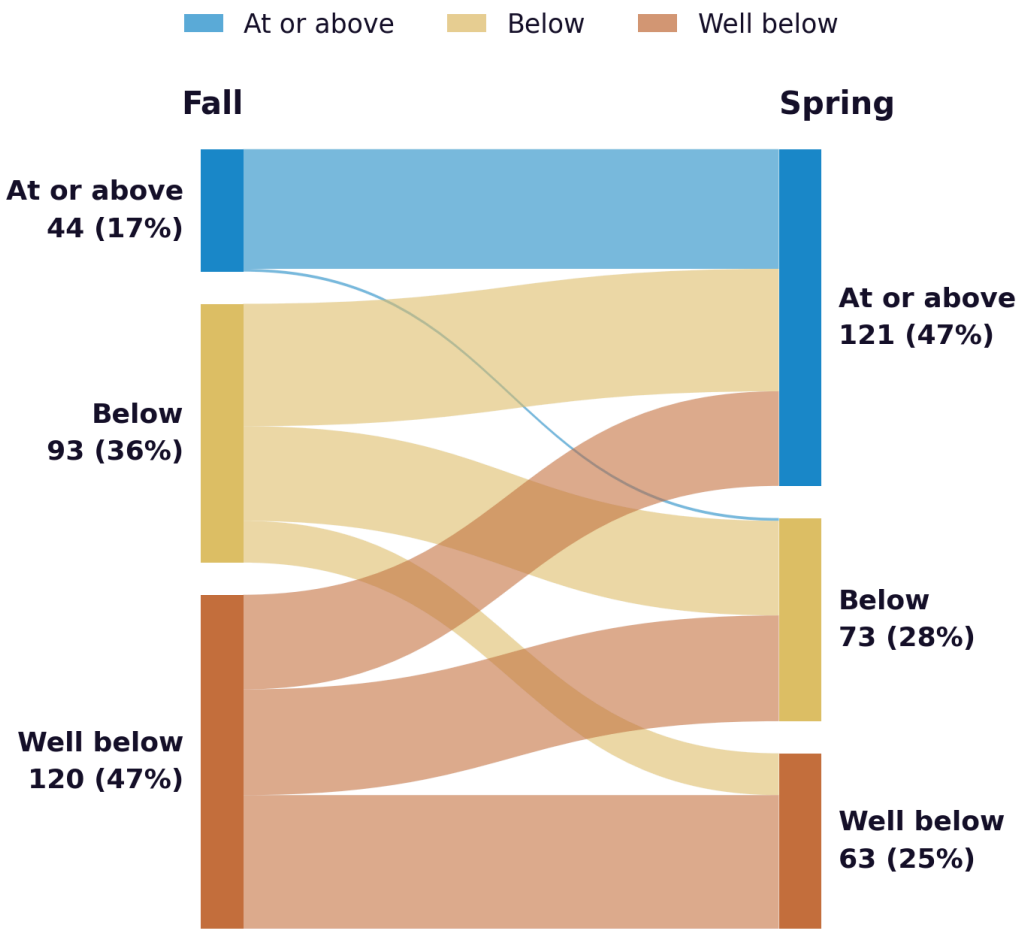
Implementation Measure	Outcome
Median sessions delivered	63
Median instructional hours	10.1
Median delivery rate	71%
Students receiving 80 or more sessions	16%

Study Results

Benchmark Movement

Percentage of students scoring at or above benchmark rose from 17% in the fall to 47% in the spring, while the percentage scoring well below benchmark fell from 47% to 25%. For students who started the fall scoring well below benchmark, 28% scored at or above benchmark by spring; for students who started below or well below benchmark, 37% scored at or above benchmark by spring. This flow diagram traces the benchmark movements from fall to spring.

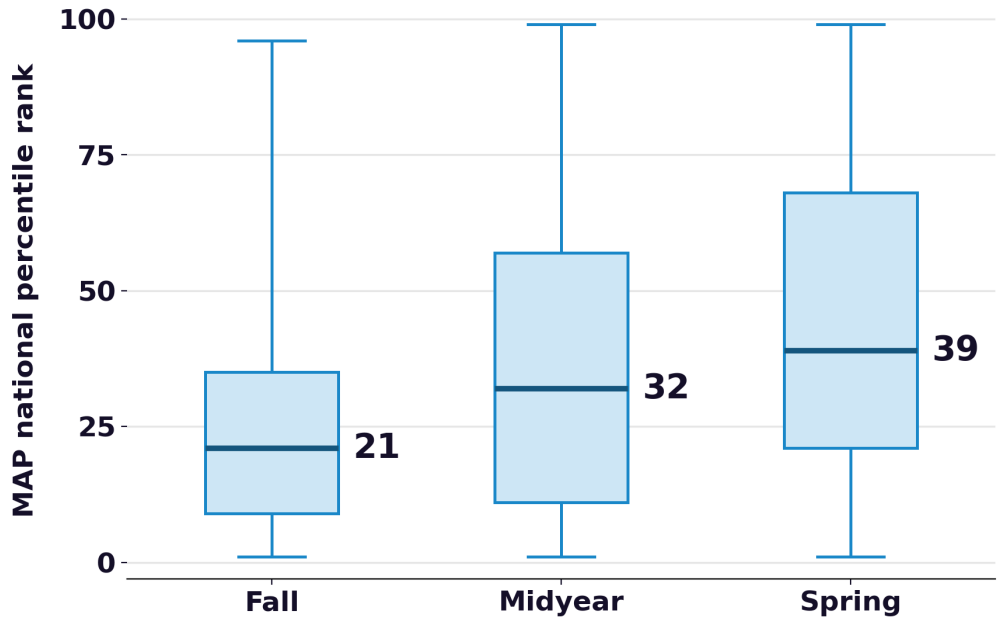
Figure 1. MAP benchmark movement from fall to spring for kindergarten students in the study. Ribbon color shows each student's fall benchmark level.



Growth Relative to National Norms

Given that MAP percentiles are norm-referenced, students progressing at the same rate as the norm sample would show no change in percentile rank over the year. Kindergarten students in the study moved from a median of the 21st percentile in the fall to the 32nd percentile at the midyear and 39th percentile in the spring. This indicates an 18-point gain over the school year relative to national norms.

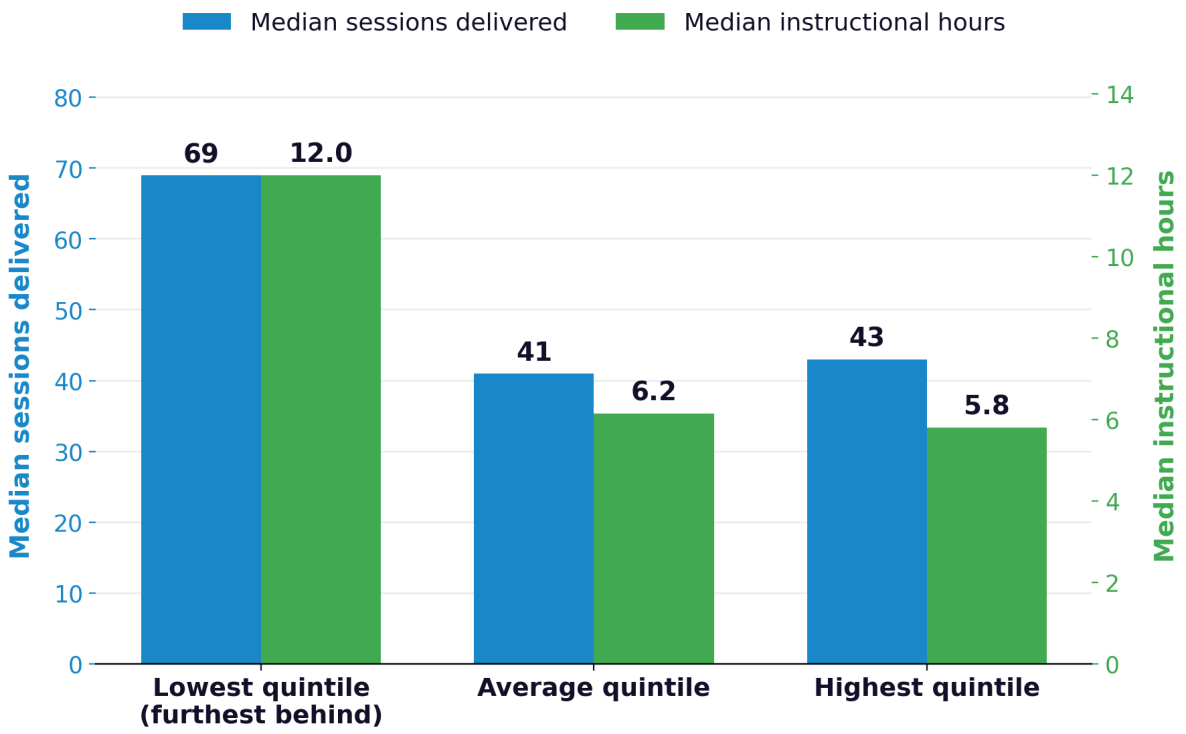
Figure 2. Median MAP national percentile rank at fall, midyear and spring for kindergarten students in the study. Boxes span the 25th to 75th percentile; whiskers span the full range.



Relationship Between Achievement Level and Sessions Delivered

Kindergarten students who began the year in the lowest fall MAP achievement quintile received a median of 69 sessions and 12.0 instructional hours. Students who began in the average quintile received 41 sessions and 6.2 hours, and those in the highest quintile received 43 sessions and 5.8 hours. Across participants, fall achievement and sessions delivered were inversely related (Spearman $\rho = -0.33$, $p < .001$). In other words, students who were furthest from benchmark received roughly twice as much instruction time as students reading at grade level. Aligning dosage with need is a challenge in tutoring implementations; intensive support frequently drifts toward students who are more consistently present and/or are already close to proficiency. The district avoided that drift and provided the greatest amount of instruction to students with the greatest need.

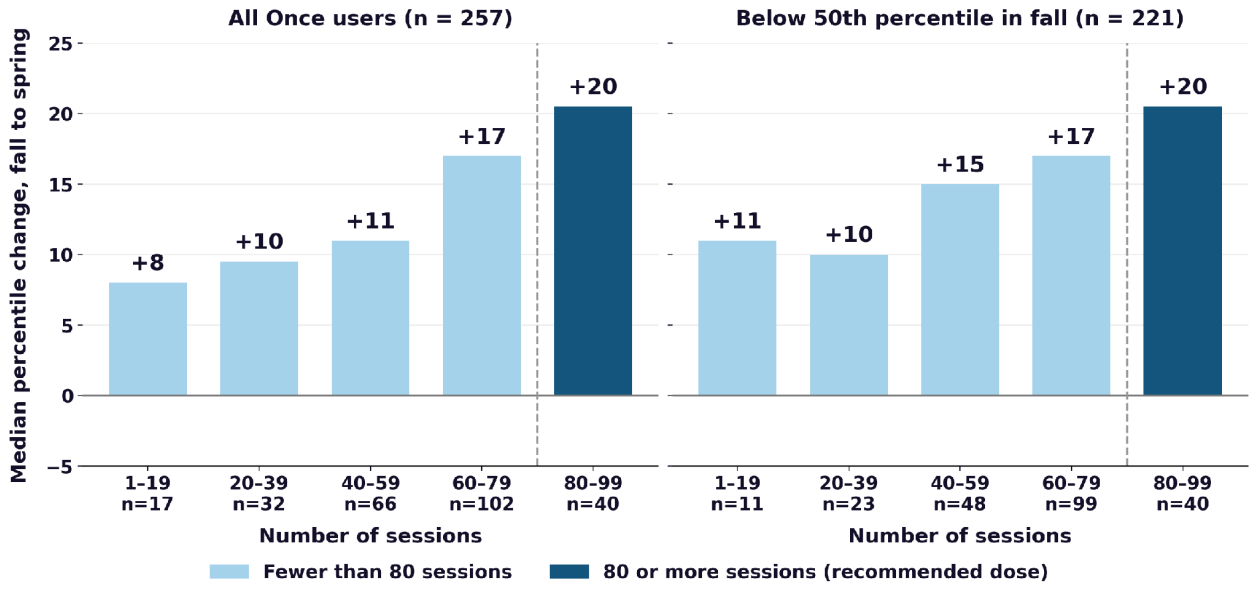
Figure 3. Median number of Once sessions and instructional hours delivered as a function of fall MAP scores.



Relationship Between Tutoring Sessions and Outcomes

There is a clear relationship between number of *Once* sessions delivered and median percentile change from fall to spring on MAP Growth Reading. For all students, median percentile change rose +8 points when delivered 1 to 19 sessions, +10 points when delivered 20 to 39 sessions, +11 points for 40 to 59 sessions, +17 points for 60 to 79 sessions, and +20 points when delivered 80 or more sessions. When outcomes are restricted to students who began the year scoring below the 50th percentile, a similar pattern emerges: +11, +10, +15, +17, and +20 points across the five bands of sessions delivered. Thus, kindergartners in the district were able to demonstrate greater progress in reading when they received more *Once* tutoring sessions.

Figure 4. Median change in MAP percentile rank as a function of Once sessions delivered; Outcomes shown for all students and students who scored below 50th percentile in fall.



Discussion

Compared to where they began at the start of the 2025–26 school year, kindergarten students who received *Once* tutoring in the district ended the year meaningfully stronger against both the NWEA MAP benchmark criteria and the national norms. An examination of number of sessions delivered and instructional time in relationship to fall MAP scores showed that the district targeted delivery of the program to students in the bottom quintile — that is, students with the most need. Although the majority of students did not receive a full 80 tutoring sessions — a threshold found to be effective in earlier research — the median number of sessions delivered to students in the bottom quintile was relatively close to threshold. Further, it was found that students who received more tutoring sessions demonstrated greater growth from fall to spring on the MAP.

Limitations

A key limitation is that this study is descriptive and correlational in nature. It was able to show advances in reading made by students who received *Once* and also document an association between time spent receiving *Once* and reading growth. However, it did not include a comparison group to assess reading outcomes for students who did not receive *Once* over the same time period. A previous quasi-experimental study compared *Once* students to a matched group of non-*Once* peers and found students who completed 80 or more sessions at the end of the year outperformed their peers (Schechter et al., 2026). Without a comparison group, these results could not be confirmed here.

Another limitation of this study is researchers could not identify how dosage levels were determined. Students may have received *Once* tutoring for reasons related to fall MAP scores or other indicators of need, attendance and the challenges of school scheduling, all of which can impact reading growth.

A final limitation is that this study failed to include any formal measures of implementation fidelity, such as research-based classroom observations or survey responses. It would have been informative to survey/interview the paraprofessionals asked to deliver *Once* — along with teachers and administrative staff — to gather insights into ease or difficulty in implementing the program and any suggestions they have for improvements.

Considerations for Districts Evaluating *Once*

Districts considering a similar implementation of *Once* may wish to plan around the following findings from this report:

Reaching the 80-session threshold should be an operational goal. Given that reading growth has been found to be strongest for students receiving 80 or more *Once* sessions, a key goal would be to develop an implementation schedule that allows participating students, especially those with the greatest needs, to reach the 80-session threshold.

Establish a monitoring process for tracking delivery rates. Track the delivery of *Once* instruction against a target rate of 80% of sessions delivered. Monitor sessions delivered before versus after the spring testing window.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Kindergartners in this district who received *Once* in 2025–26 ended the year substantially stronger against both the benchmark criterion and national MAP norms than they began it, and the district had much success directing the program toward the students who needed it most. These are encouraging results consistent with the program's intended effect. Broader *Once* evidence continues to develop. Given the district's intent to continue delivering *Once* in

upcoming years, this evaluation will likely be revisited within the next one to two budget cycles. Next steps should consider documenting how the *Once* program is incorporated into the remaining ELA curriculum and other areas of instruction. Addressing “curricula coherence” would enrich the field's understanding of the *Once* program and its capabilities alongside other classroom practices. Future research should also consider inclusion of a matched comparison group, allowing the district to be in a stronger position to answer questions about the causal impact of *Once* in their classrooms.

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