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Once Early-Reading Program Effectiveness Study

Instructional Time and Kindergarten DIBELS
Outcomes in Tangipahoa Parish School System
2025–2026



Authors:

Rachel Schechter, Ph.D.
Paul Macaruso, Ph.D.

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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. Previous research has shown *Once* is particularly effective for students below grade level who complete 80 or more sessions. This report examines a district-wide implementation of *Once* with nearly an entire kindergarten cohort in Tangipahoa Parish School System, a Louisiana school district, during the 2025–26 school year, using the DIBELS 8th Edition assessment.

STUDY DETAILS

Sample Description

- Sample: 1,263 Kindergartners in 14 elementary schools (99% of all kindergartners)
- Demographics: 82% Economically Disadvantaged | 13% Students with Disabilities | 6% Multilingual Learners
- Location: Tangipahoa Parish School System

Methodology

- Design: Descriptive/correlational (no control group)
 - Median of ~100 instructional sessions (17.4 hours) per student
 - Median delivery rate of 80% of scheduled sessions
 - Outcomes examined by instructional-hours quartile
- Assessment Measure:
 - DIBELS 8th Edition Composite Score
- Statistical Controls: Fall DIBELS score and school of enrollment (partial correlation controlling for these covariates)

STUDY CONTEXT

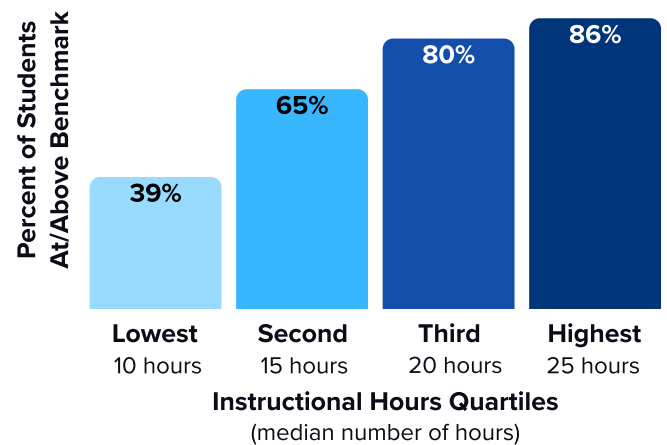
Before implementing *Once* Early Reading, Tangipahoa Parish School System (TPSS) saw the percentage of kindergartners at or above benchmark on DIBELS fall from 31% to 24% over three years, while the state's rate held near 29%. TPSS implemented *Once* across all 14 elementary schools in 2025–26, reaching 99% of kindergartners. This report examines 1,263 kindergartners who received *Once* and had complete fall and spring DIBELS 8th Edition data.

KEY FINDING

Most students received the target of 80+ sessions, and students who received more instructional time were consistently more likely to reach benchmark by spring.

- At-or-above-benchmark attainment on DIBELS rose from 24% (fall) to 68% (spring)
- Median national percentile rose from 43rd to 61st.
- Students with the most instructional time had more than twice as many students at/above benchmark by Spring compared to those with the lowest instructional time.

**Spring Benchmark Attainment
by Instructional Hours**



Notes: Descriptive/correlational. Students with more instructional time showed better outcomes (partial $r = .26$, $p < .001$, controlling for fall score and school).

STUDY DESIGN





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[LXD Research](#) at Charles River Media Inc.

Abstract

In this study, Tangipahoa Parish School System in Louisiana, implemented the reading program *Once* with over 1,300 kindergarten students during the 2025–2026 school year. *Once* is a coached tutoring program delivered to students in one-on-one sessions. Students in the study who received *Once* had their reading skills assessed in the fall and spring with the DIBELS 8th Edition assessment. The analyses conducted here were mainly descriptive with the inclusion of correlations between instructional time and outcomes. It was found that the percentage of students reading at or above benchmark on DIBELS rose from 24% in fall to 68% in spring of the school year and, among students who began the fall scoring below benchmark, 58% reached benchmark by the spring. Further, the median student's standing relative to national norms on DIBELS rose from 43rd to 61st percentile. A final set of analyses showed that students who received more instructional time with *Once* had consistently better outcomes than students who received less time, a pattern that held after accounting for fall scores on DIBELS and school of enrollment. Given that the relationship between instructional time and outcomes was quite steep, it suggests that fidelity in delivery of *Once* is likely to be closely tied to results.

Keywords: high-dosage tutoring, kindergarten, early literacy

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Program Description	2
District Context	3
Method	3
Participants and Study Context	3
Implementation Fidelity	3
Study Results	4
Benchmark Movement	4
Growth Relative to National Norms	5
Relationship Between Instructional Time and Outcomes	5
Relationship Between Tutoring Sessions and Outcomes	6
Variation Across Schools	7
Discussion	8
Limitations	8
Considerations for Districts Evaluating <i>Once</i>	9
Conclusion and Next Steps	9
References	10



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 (word decoding) is a valuable precursor to effective reading. That is, explicitly teaching children phonological awareness and letter knowledge results in improved decoding and word recognition skills (e.g., Gersten et al., 2017; Foorman et al., 2016). By 2026, a majority of states 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 (Rayner et al., 2001; Ehri, 2014). 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, and in Louisiana's kindergarten standards specifically, the instructional emphasis falls almost entirely 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 (Jimenez & Schechter, 2024a, 2024b; Cleghorn et al., 2025). A more recent quasi-experimental study compared *Once* students to a matched group of non-participating peers in the same schools and found that students completing 80 or more sessions scored significantly higher on FastBridge at year's end than comparison students (Hedges' $g = 0.46$), while the full below-benchmark sample showed a smaller, non-significant trend ($g = 0.17$) (Schechter et al., 2026). That study is notable because it included a within-school comparison group, providing a stronger basis for attributing outcomes to the program.

The present study examines a district-wide implementation in Tangipahoa Parish School System (TPSS), in which nearly every kindergartner received *Once*, a setting that offers unusual scale and a wide view of delivery, but no internal comparison group. The study asks three questions: 1) How much reading growth did kindergartners show across the year, both against the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) benchmark criterion and against national norms? 2) Did students who received more instruction show better reading outcomes? 3) How consistently was the program delivered across the district containing 14 schools? The design supports descriptions and associations rather than any causal attributions, and the findings are presented in those terms throughout.

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. Student progression through the program is mastery-based rather than fixed to a calendar. Approximately 120 staff members delivered *Once* instruction across TPSS's 14 elementary schools during the 2025–2026 school year.

As described above, prior research on *Once* has identified approximately 80 sessions as a threshold above which the program shows particular effectiveness for students. Delivery of tutoring at a dosage level a program is designed for is a well-documented challenge nationally. In one widely cited, multi-district study of pandemic-recovery tutoring efforts, students who were 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. Actual delivery often landed between 25% and 50% of what districts had intended, and in some cases considerably less (Carbonari et al., 2022). This national context is useful for interpreting TPSS's own delivery figures, described in [Implementation Fidelity](#) below.

Across a series of independent studies of *Once*, average delivered dosage has risen year over year: 42 sessions in a 2022–23 pilot study (Bennett et al., 2024), 45 to 86 sessions depending on the district in a 2023–24 study (Lee et al., 2025), 62 sessions in a 2024–25 correlational study (Jimenez et al., 2025), and approximately 100 sessions in the current study. *Once* is the same



organization delivering the tutoring model in all four studies, so this rising trend is consistent with the company's training, coaching, and implementation practices maturing over successive years. The studies were conducted in different districts, but the provider was the same—making company-level improvement a plausible source of this trend.

District Context

Tangipahoa Parish School System enrolled over 1,300 kindergarten students across 14 elementary schools in Louisiana. Eighty-two percent of these students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 13% carry a disability flag, and 6% are identified as multilingual learners.

Prior to implementing *Once*, TPSS identified a worrisome pattern in kindergarten reading readiness scores in recent years. Students who entered kindergarten in the fall of 2023–24 scored at or above benchmark on the DIBELS 8th Edition at a rate of 31%. This value declined to 23% in the fall of 2024–25 and 24% in the fall of 2025–26. In contrast, the state of Louisiana's rates remained relatively flat at 30%, 28%, and 29%, respectively. Thus, TPSS's incoming classes showed a drop of seven percentile points following 2023–24 while the state's did not. These declining reading readiness scores for incoming kindergartners in the district served as an impetus for TPSS to start using *Once*.

Method

Participants and Study Context

This analysis uses data from 1,263 kindergartners across 14 schools. Each student has a valid fall and spring DIBELS 8th Edition composite score and a matched *Once* usage record. Percentile references are to the University of Oregon DIBELS 8th Edition 2021–2022 national norm sample (Technical Report 2201).

Because 99% of Tangipahoa Parish School System's 1,380 kindergartners received *Once*, no internal comparison group of non-participating students exists within the district. The findings presented here are therefore descriptive and correlational rather than showing a causal relationship. Where growth is described relative to national norms, the comparison reflects DIBELS national reference distribution rather than a matched control group. Limitations of this study design are described below.

Implementation Fidelity

Tangipahoa Parish School System delivered *Once* with a level of fidelity that is high by national standards. The median student completed approximately 100 instructional sessions and 17.4 hours of instruction over the school year. The median delivery rate—that is, the percentage of scheduled sessions actually delivered—was 80%. As noted in [Program Description](#), typical tutoring implementations nationally often achieve only 25% to 50% of the planned dosage; an



80% delivery rate represents an unusually full implementation for a program operating at district scale.

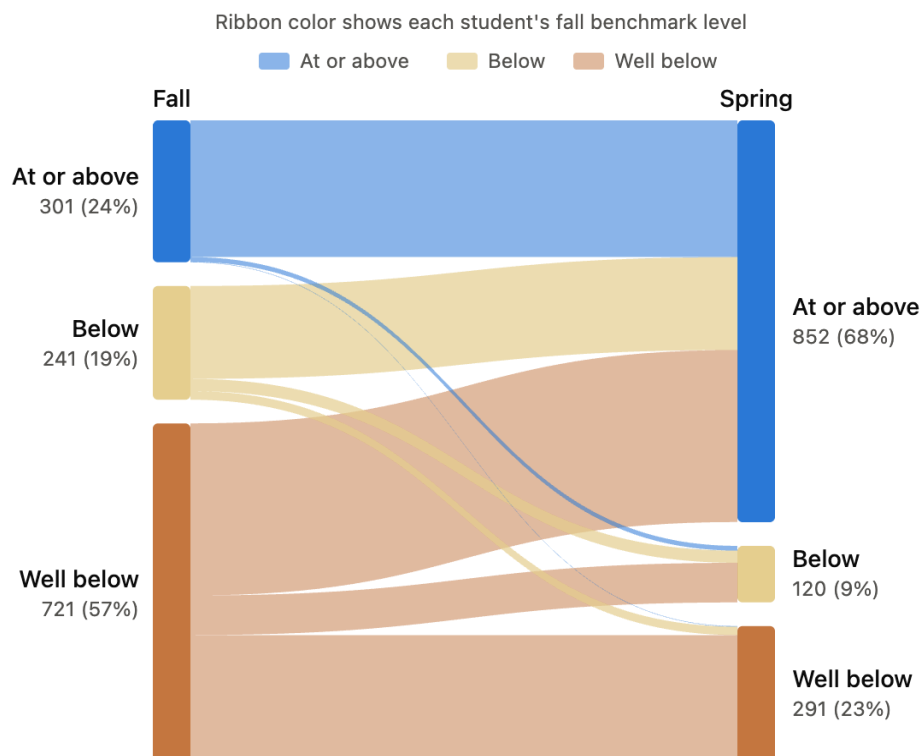
The median session count of approximately 100 also cleared the 80-session threshold that prior research on *Once* has identified as associated with effectiveness for students reading below grade level (see "Program Description"). Delivery did, however, still fall short of the program's full intended model. *Once* is designed to be implemented in daily one-on-one sessions; in the case of this district, over three out of five scheduled sessions occurred per week. Because instructional hours are closely related to outcomes, as shown in [Relationship Between Instructional Time and Outcomes](#) below, this remaining gap remains relevant to how a district plans its implementation.

Study Results

Benchmark Movement

Among the 721 students who began the fall scoring well below benchmark on DIBELS, 51% made progress and scored at or above benchmark by the spring. Among the 962 students who began the fall scoring below or well below benchmark, 58% scored at or above benchmark by the spring. Among students who began the fall already scoring at or above benchmark, 96% remained at or above benchmark in the spring. Overall, 51% of students moved up at least one level while only 2% moved down.

Figure 1. Kindergarten DIBELS benchmark movement, fall to spring

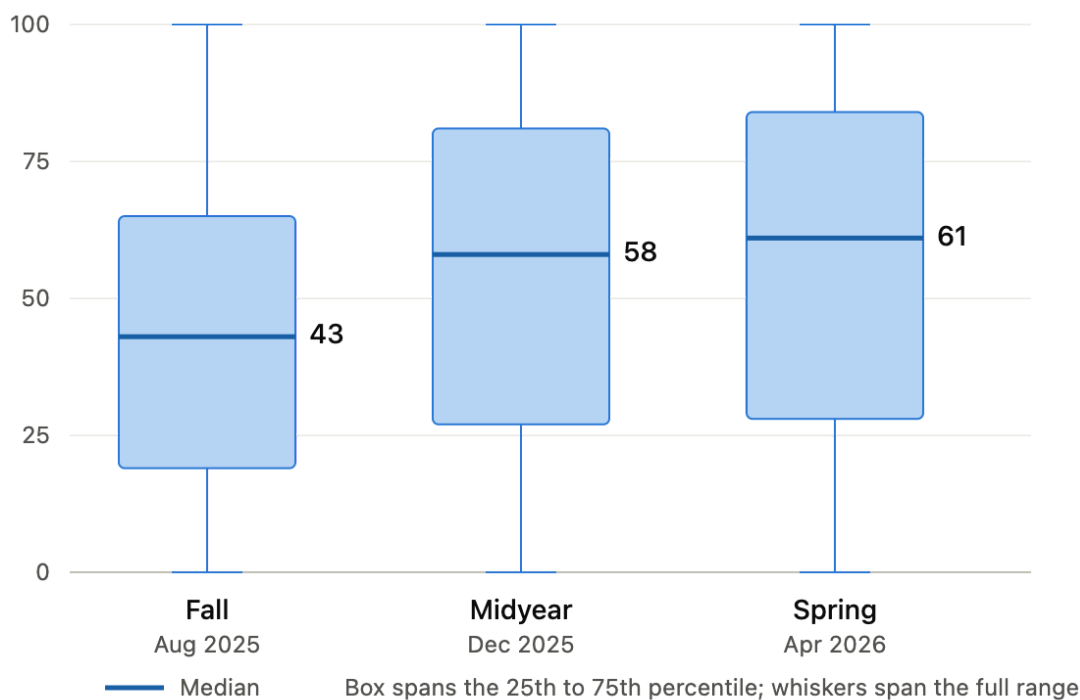




Growth Relative to National Norms

Because DIBELS percentiles are norm-referenced, a cohort of students progressing at the same rate as the national sample would show no change in percentile rank across the year. For kindergartners in Tangipahoa Parish School System, the median percentile rank rose from 43rd in the fall to 61st in the spring. As shown in the figure, most of the measured growth occurred between fall (43rd percentile) and midyear (58th percentile); growth from midyear (58th percentile) to spring (61st percentile) was comparatively modest. This analysis did not determine the cause of this pattern and it is noted as an open question in [Considerations for Districts Evaluating *Once*](#).

Figure 2. DIBELS National Percentile Rank at Fall, Midyear, and Spring

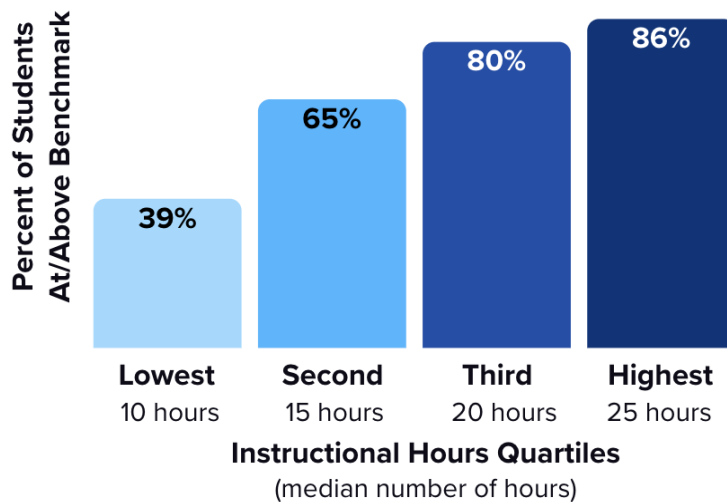


Relationship Between Instructional Time and Outcomes

Students were divided into four equal groups based on total instructional hours received. The outcomes shown below demonstrate a clear relationship between instructional hours and spring performance on DIBELS. Consider the students who fall in the lowest quartile of instructional hours. Only 39% of these students scored at or above benchmark in the spring. This percentage is less than half of the proportions of students who received the most instruction (80% and 86% for students who received instructional hours in the third and highest quartiles, respectively).



Figure 3. Spring DIBELS At or Above Benchmark Attained by Instructional Hours Quartiles



Students who received more instruction had stronger spring performance, and this relationship holds even when comparisons are limited to peers within the same school. Controlling for fall scores, school and demographic characteristics, the partial correlation between instructional hours and spring DIBELS composite scores is .26 ($p < .001$), down from .41 when these controls are not in place. Of course, other unmeasured differences between higher- and lower-dose students may have affected students' performance.

It was also found that dosage and need did not align well; that is, students who started the school year with the lowest DIBELS scores did not receive the most tutoring. Students who began the year scoring below the 20th percentile received a median of 15 instructional hours, compared to 19 hours for students who started the year scoring above the 80th percentile. Despite not receiving the most instructional hours, the lowest-performing students were the ones for whom added tutoring mattered most: the relationship between hours and outcomes was steepest among those who began furthest below benchmark in the fall, as seen in the analysis below.

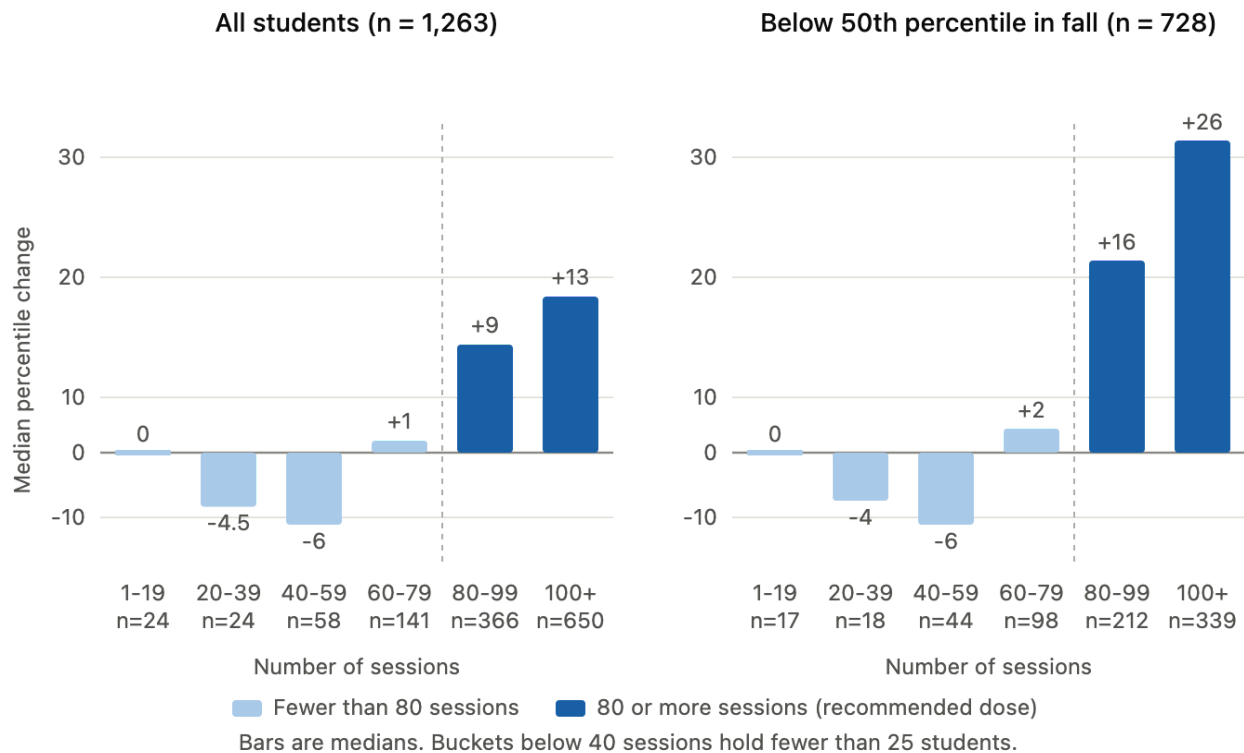
Relationship Between Tutoring Sessions and Outcomes

A second view of this relationship uses the number of sessions a student received rather than total instructional hours, and change in national percentile rank rather than spring benchmark attainment. Students were grouped into six session bands. Among all kindergartners, the median student completing fewer than 60 sessions finished the year at or slightly below where they started relative to national norms. From there, the pattern rises steadily: the median student completing 80 to 99 sessions gained 9 percentile points, and the median student completing 100 or more gained 13. The relationship is roughly twice as steep among the 728 students who began the year below the 50th percentile. For that group, the median gain was 16 percentile points at 80 to 99 sessions and 26 points at 100 or more. In both panels, the shift from flat to rising occurs



around 80 sessions, consistent with the threshold identified in prior research on *Once* (see [Program Description](#)), though the present data show a continuous gradient rather than a sharp cutoff.

Figure 4. Median change in DIBELS national percentile rank by number of *Once* sessions completed, for all students and for students scoring below the 50th percentile in fall.



Note that the two lowest session bands contain fewer than 25 students each, so their medians are unstable and the apparent dip at 40 to 59 sessions should not be read as a negative finding. More broadly, the large majority of students in this district completed more than 60 sessions, which limits what these data can say about outcomes at substantially lower levels of delivery.

Variation Across Schools

A look at percentile changes – that is, fall-to-spring changes in each student’s percentile scores – showed substantial variation in the 14 schools. The median percentile change ranged from -7 to +34 percentile points across schools. This range exceeds what would be expected from sampling variation alone at typical per-school enrollment and suggests that school-specific factors—such as scheduling, staffing stability, and implementation oversight—could have affected outcomes independent of program design.



Discussion

After receiving tutoring from *Once* during the 2025–26 school year, kindergartners in Tangipahoa Parish School System ended the year substantially stronger in reading than at the beginning of the year, both against the DIBELS benchmark criterion and national norms, and the district delivered the program with an admirable level of completeness unusual for tutoring at this scale. Two key sources of variation were identified in this study. Students who received more instructional time had better outcomes – a relationship that persisted even after accounting for fall scores and school of enrollment – and outcomes differed widely across TPSS’s 14 schools. Both of these variations reflect how the program was delivered rather than the program itself, which makes them actionable for a district planning its own implementation.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is that the results are descriptive and correlational and therefore do not support causal conclusions. Given that nearly all eligible kindergartners in TPSS received *Once*, no within-district comparison groups were available. Causal claims would require a matched or randomized comparison group, which this district’s near-universal reach did not allow. The gains described here reflect within-group changes relative to national norms, not a treatment-versus-control group comparison. Notably, a quasi-experimental study conducted in a large urban Tennessee district included within-school comparison groups and found a significant treatment effect for students who completed 80 or more sessions (Schechter et al., 2026). The instructional time-outcome pattern found in the present study is consistent with those earlier findings in terms of direction and shape; however, the present study cannot fully replicate the earlier findings without the benefit of a quasi-experimental design.

This study has other limitations. First, DIBELS was administered and scored by school staff, some of whom also delivered *Once* instruction. Thus, there was no independent scoring process. Second, *Once* usage data were extracted in June, following the April testing window. Thus, the reported dosage figures may include some instruction time delivered after spring DIBELS testing occurred. Lastly, Louisiana’s publicly available district-level data for students in grades K–3 cannot be used to independently confirm a program effect, however, in 2025–26, kindergarten was the only grade in TPSS to sustain substantial gains, and the only grade showing within-year growth that exceeded the state average.¹ The 2025–26 outcomes are consistent with a

¹ In 2025–26, kindergarten was the only grade in the district to post a substantial year-over-year gain (+9.6 points, against +0.3 in grade 1, –3.6 in grade 2, and +1.0 in grade 3), and the only grade whose within-year growth exceeded the state average for that grade (+42.0 against Louisiana’s +39.9). Statewide end-of-year changes from 2024–25 to 2025–26:

- K: 60.6 → 69.0 = +8.4
- Grade 3: 61.7 → 64.0 = +2.3
- Grade 2: 65.1 → 64.4 = –0.7
- Grade 1: 68.9 → 67.5 = –1.4

Kindergarten’s gain is nearly four times the next largest, and it’s the figure LDOE itself highlighted in the spring 2026 release.



kindergarten-specific program effect of *Once*.

Considerations for Districts Evaluating *Once*

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

1. Given the steep relationship between instructional hours and outcomes found in this study, a delivery rate above 80 sessions is likely to have a measurable, positive impact on results.
2. Districts should establish a monitoring process from the outset to maintain a target implementation rate of 80%.
3. Anticipate and manage school-level variations. The wide range of outcomes found across TPSS's schools indicates that program presence alone does not guarantee consistent results; school-level implementation support is a highly relevant variable.
4. Using a prior-year or non-treatment comparison group would substantially strengthen a district's conclusions about the program. A district that retains a comparison cohort—either via a prior-year baseline or through a phased rollout—would be positioned to produce a stronger evidence base than this study supports.

Conclusion and Next Steps

As noted earlier, kindergartners in TPSS had shown a drop in reading readiness scores following the 2023–24 school year. Students entered kindergarten in the fall of 2023–24 scoring at or above benchmark at a rate of 31%. This value dropped to 23% and 24% in 2024–25 and 2025–26, respectively. In contrast, fall scores for kindergartners across the state of Louisiana remained relatively flat (28%–30%) during the same time period. Given this context, observing rising scores for kindergartners during the 2025–26 school year—when *Once* was implemented—is impressive. It does, however, raise questions about preschool enrollment or composition in TPSS that cannot be answered here.

Overall, the findings in this study are encouraging but remain correlational. That is, the near-universal implementation of *Once* in TPSS precludes a comparison-group design, and thus the results should be read as consistent with the program's intended effect rather than proof of impact. The relationship between dosage and outcomes and school-level variations documented here have direct implications for how a district might plan and monitor its own implementation.



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