Fresh Start

Key Conclusions

1. Fresh Start shows considerable promise as an effective catch-up intervention for low-attaining readers at the transition phase from primary to secondary school.

2. Pupils must be grouped according to the reading scores obtained from a Fresh Start screening test. Each group has a homogeneous level in terms of pupil reading abilities.

3. Continuous feedback to teachers and support from trainers assists successful implementation.

4. It is feasible for schools to conduct evaluations of their own planned interventions, under favourable circumstances, and with some advice and oversight from independent expert evaluators.

What is the impact?

The FS pupils in the intervention group made more progress in literacy than the control group after 22 weeks. The overall effect size was +0.24 in terms of the gain between the scores in the test before the intervention (the pre-test) and the test after the intervention (the post-test). This is equivalent to approximately 3 months of additional progress in reading age. Progress was assessed as the gain in scores between a pre-test (GL Assessment’s New Group Reading Test A) and a post-test (New Group Reading Test B). The impact evaluation also suggests positive progress results for FSM-eligible pupils, and for all pupil sub-groups regardless of age, sex, first language, ethnicity, or special education need. However, as the numbers of pupils in the sub-groups are smaller, these findings are less secure than the overall finding.

The intervention was observed by the evaluation team as being generally well conducted, and attractive to teachers and pupils. The intervention was well received by the schools. All participating schools have plans to continue Fresh Start for future cohorts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>NO. OF PUPILS</th>
<th>EFFECT SIZE</th>
<th>ESTIMATED MONTHS’ PROGRESS</th>
<th>EVIDENCE STRENGTH</th>
<th>COST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intervention vs control (all pupil)</td>
<td>419 (10 schools)</td>
<td>+0.24</td>
<td>+3 months</td>
<td>✭✭✭✭✭</td>
<td>£££££</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention vs control (FSM)</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>+0.24</td>
<td>+3 months</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>£££££</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How secure is the finding?

The existing literature suggests considerable promise from using phonics in general, and Fresh Start more specifically. However, the impact of FS has not been demonstrated in the UK, and so this efficacy trial is the first of its kind in England.

The primary outcome measure was reading comprehension as measured by an independent test. The results were analysed with gains in overall reading scores as well as with standardised age scores, and both gave similar effect sizes. A pre-test indicated there was considerable imbalance between the groups (with the treatment group having lower prior attainment). Attrition was very low — only 2%. Only 14 pupils have missing test scores. The control group activity was ‘business as usual’ and these pupils were not given access to the programme. The intervention was regularly administered, the process was closely monitored and there was no indication of pupils
or teachers becoming demoralised after the randomisation occurred. Therefore, the evidence achieved can be interpreted as having a security rating of three padlocks.

Participation in the Fresh Start intervention was at the instigation of the school leaders and cluster heads. They were already enthusiastic about the programme. This may limit the generalisability of results to other schools who may be less enthusiastic about its potential and therefore not deliver the intervention as effectively. Group No. of pupils Effect size Estimated months’ progress Evidence strength Cost rating Intervention vs control (all pupil) 419 (10 schools) +0.24 +3 months ££ Intervention vs control (FSM) 104 +0.24 +3 months ££ *For more information about evidence ratings, see Appendix 1 in the main evaluation report. Evidence ratings are not provided for sub-group analyses, which will always be less secure than overall findings. **For more information about cost ratings, see Appendix 2 in the main evaluation report.

The process demonstrated that schools are capable of running trials, but only with appropriate expert help. The main area of concern was in allowing schools to do the randomisation. Following the randomisation process, there was a noted imbalance in the pupils’ pre-test scores in the control and intervention groups. A number of statistical techniques were applied to control for the imbalance in the two groups in the final analysis. The results suggest that the outcomes of the trials are unlikely to be caused by bias or dropout of the 14 cases.

To view the project’s evaluation protocol click here.

How much does it cost?

The direct cost to schools is for the Fresh Start training and material resources required in the intervention. For each pupil the cost of the material is £95.90. The cost of staffing to assist teachers depends largely on each school’s initial position. So, for example, a school with four relevant teachers to be trained and 20 pupils per year group, would have to pay £2,316 or around £116 per pupil.