ED-TECH EVALUATION | SUCCESS STORY

McREL's evaluation of ed-tech product gets top mark from *Evidence for ESSA*

Services McREL provided to Learning A–Z:

- A randomized controlled study (the "gold standard" in study design) of Raz-Plus, a blended reading program involving 39 K–5 classrooms in three high-poverty schools
- Comprehensive data and analysis report to the client
- Research-article manuscript for submission to peer-reviewed journal

Results: "Strong" ESSA evidence

- McREL's study found Raz-Plus to be highly effective.
- This led to a "strong" evidence rating from *Evidence for ESSA*, using criteria of the Every Student Succeeds Act.

> "McREL was a responsive, knowledgeable partner.
>
> — *Marta Leon, manager of research and evaluation, Learning A–Z*

> Independent evaluation has become a crucial part of the ed-tech marketplace. Product developers want to know how they can continue to improve their program; schools and districts want to know if the program works. We help answer both questions."
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> — *Dr. Hsiang-Yeh Ho, McREL researcher*

Evaluating the evaluators: Influential website says McREL study provides strong evidence

The Challenge

Educational technology products marketed to schools strive to help teachers provide individualized learning to all students that increases their engagement and academic success. That's a noble goal that deserves investment of a school's limited budgets, but investing in an *ineffective* tool can be costly—in terms of student achievement and finances.

Ideally school districts would be able to limit their search to products that have reliable evidence of effectiveness. But where would this evidence come from, and where would districts find it? To appeal to potential school buyers who have a healthy sense of skepticism, some publishers are turning to professional third-party evaluators to gauge their products. For example, Learning A–Z of Tucson, Arizona, hired McREL International to evaluate its blended reading program, Raz-Plus.

So far so good, but this potentially creates yet another burden for a school district—evaluating not just the product, but the evaluation. That's why the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) places great emphasis on research quality. If a trusted source says the research is reliable, then a buying decision can be approached with greater confidence.

Strategic Solution

There are a variety of ways to design research studies, and they come with different timeframes, confidence levels, and costs depending on the scope of work. After consulting with McREL, Learning A–Z decided to undertake a randomized controlled trial.

"That's the gold standard—the strongest research design we can provide to see whether the program is effective or not," study leader Dr. Hsiang-Yeh Ho said. "It takes time and a great deal of organizational capacity to conduct such an analysis, and it is inevitably costlier than a quicker but less persuasive study. However, the investment pays off with a much deeper understanding and confidence in the results."

For the study, McREL collaborated with the client to recruit 39 K–5 teachers from three high-poverty schools in the southeastern U.S., and closely monitored their use of the Raz-Plus program as a supplemental learning resource.

The project was a learning opportunity not only for the educators and students at the study sites who gained access to an effective product, but for Learning A–Z to become more familiar with what goes into high-quality research. Said Marta Leon, manager of research and evaluation for Learning A–Z: "McREL was a responsive, knowledgeable partner that assisted us with research planning, study implementation, and reporting the results. The principal investigators sent us frequent progress updates and served as a wonderful resource for all our questions about evidence standards and conducting research in real-world settings."

Results

McREL completed the study and found an important positive outcome: After one semester, students in classrooms using Raz-Plus scored significantly higher than control students on a reading assessment, with an average effect size of +0.14. After the study concluded, McREL's researchers prepared a report for submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

McREL also sent a draft to an influential website called *Evidence for ESSA* (www.evidenceforessa.org), run by the Johns Hopkins University School of Education specifically to help school districts look for ed-tech and other interventions with solid research behind them. The site gave the study an important vote of confidence, saying it provides "strong" evidence of effectiveness—the highest of ESSA's four tiers of evidence.

"It's important to note that, while McREL always hopes for positive outcomes for teaching and learning, in our evaluation role, we are agnostic about individual products or services," said Dr. Sheila Arens, who leads McREL's research teams. "We strive to help our clients understand the characteristics of quality research and help them collect reliable, useful information about their products' performance."

The same holds true even if McREL's evaluation finds a product is not effective. "It happens, and that doesn't mean our work was any less thorough or any less useful," said Arens. "The client can use those findings as a valuable source of feedback to make improvements to their product."

Next Steps

If McREL's report is accepted for publication, that will allow other researchers and educators to examine the study's methodology for themselves and, if they want, try to replicate the results. McREL is also interested in conducting additional studies on the Raz-Plus program. As researcher Ho points out, no single study, however high in quality, should be considered the final word on any product. Conditions differ at different schools, so further research could uncover ways to make the product even more useful.

"This initial study provided evidence to support the program, but we recommend additional studies to understand how teachers can better implement the program with their students," she said.

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