

Early Reading Growth with UFLI Foundations

What a Full Year of Explicit Phonics Instruction Delivered

*Students who received a full year of explicit, systematic foundational reading instruction ended the year **more than a full standard deviation** ahead of matched peers, and the gains were largest in classrooms where teachers taught the program as designed.*

UFLI Foundations

UFLI Foundations is an explicit and systematic phonics program developed by the University of Florida Literacy Institute to build the skills that determine whether a child learns to read: phonemic awareness, decoding and encoding, and proficiency with connected text. Taught to the whole class for 30 minutes a day, it follows a scope and sequence of 128 phonics skills that introduces speech sounds, the letters that represent them, and the correspondences between them in the order children need them. Each lesson runs eight steps across two days and arrives with a teacher manual, slide decks, decodable passages, and web-based practice tools built to make faithful implementation attainable.

What we set out to learn

Many widely used core reading curricula do not include enough explicit phonics and phonemic awareness in the early grades. One north central Florida district, with 21 elementary schools and more than 80% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, adopted UFLI Foundations for all students in kindergarten through Grade 2 in fall 2021, adding it to the core program already in place. Students in the same schools and grade levels the year before had received business-as-usual instruction, creating a natural comparison. We asked whether a full year of the program raised early reading skills for the students most at risk of reading difficulty, and whether it mattered how faithfully teachers delivered it.

GRADES

Kindergarten-Grade 2

ASSESSMENT

DIBELS 8th Edition

PERIOD

2020–21 vs. 2021–22

What we found

It did, and by a wide margin. Among students who began the year below the median score for their grade, matched one to one on pretest scores and demographics (1,128 kindergarteners and 1,130 first graders), those who received *UFLI Foundations* finished well ahead of their control peers on the DIBELS composite. Kindergarten students gained about 22 points more than control students and first graders about 12 points more, both statistically significant after accounting for teacher and school differences. As effect sizes, that is $g = 1.20$ to 1.44 in kindergarten and $g = 1.42$ to 2.04 in first grade, which is large by any standard in education research. The practical translation matters as much: control-group kindergarteners finished the year still averaging in the At-Risk range, while the treatment group's average landed in Minimal Risk, the level at which core instruction alone is considered sufficient.

Fall and spring DIBELS composite scores, by grade and condition

Grade and condition	Fall	Spring	Gain
Kindergarten, control	274	397	123
Kindergarten, UFLI Foundations	275	421	146
Grade 1, control	320	427	107
Grade 1, UFLI Foundations	321	440	119

Mean DIBELS 8th Edition composite scores for the propensity score matched samples (1,128 kindergarten and 1,130 first-grade students). Groups were statistically equivalent at pretest ($g < .25$). Adjusted for pretest and student characteristics, the treatment advantage was $g = 1.20$ to 1.44 in kindergarten and $g = 1.42$ to 2.04 in first grade.

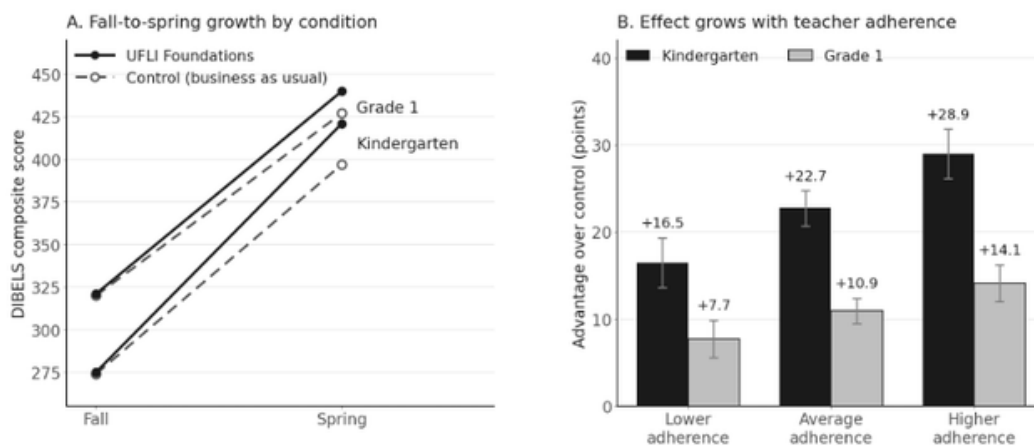


Figure 1. Fall-to-spring growth on the DIBELS composite by grade and condition (left), and the size of the *UFLI Foundations* advantage at lower, average, and higher teacher adherence (right). Error bars show ± 1 standard error.

Why fidelity mattered

Coaches and administrators observed teachers with a 31-item checklist, rating each on adherence (whether the lesson steps were taught as designed) and dosage (how often and how long). Adherence was what moved outcomes. The advantage over control grew steadily as adherence rose, from about 16 points to nearly 29 in kindergarten and from about 8 points to 14 in first grade. Dosage was consistent enough across classrooms to show no such relationship. Teachers were already delivering the program well on average (3.29 on a 0–4 adherence scale), which makes the gradient more striking: even within a faithful implementation, the classrooms closest to the design produced nearly twice the gain.

Why the design matters

The program bundles practices that each carry independent evidence: systematic teaching of grapheme–phoneme correspondences, encoding as well as decoding, blending without breaking the speech stream, explicit attention to articulatory gestures, interleaved review, immediate corrective feedback, and decodable text built only from correspondences students have already learned. Because students received the whole package, these data cannot isolate which ingredient did the work. What they do show is that outcomes tracked how completely teachers delivered the sequence, which is what one would expect if the value lies in the cumulative progression rather than in any single part.

What it means for schools

Two things follow. First, adding explicit foundational reading instruction to an existing core program produced large gains for the students who needed them most, in 30 minutes a day of regular whole-class instruction rather than as a pull-out requiring additional staff. Second, adoption alone is not the lever. The same program produced roughly twice the effect where teachers adhered closely to its design, which places coaching, observation, and structured feedback on adherence at the center of an implementation plan rather than at its margins.

About the analysis

Findings come from one north central Florida district whose 21 elementary schools adopted *UFLI Foundations* for all students in kindergarten through Grade 2 in 2021–22. That cohort was compared with students in the same schools and grade levels during 2020–21, who received business-as-usual instruction, using one-to-one optimal propensity score matching on pretest DIBELS scores and demographics to establish baseline equivalence. Impacts were estimated with multilevel models including random effects for teacher and school and adjusting for pretest, race and ethnicity, gender, free or reduced-price lunch eligibility, and special education status. Because the cohorts attended school in different years, and the comparison year immediately followed pandemic-related closures, the design is weaker than random assignment, and results describe one district’s experience with students who began below the grade-level median. Full study: Lane, H. B., Contesse, V. A., Gage, N. A., & Burns, M. K. (2025), *Reading Research Quarterly*, 60, e607.