

An Exploratory Evaluation of Sounds of Success in Maine

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March 2026



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Preferred citation: Cook, M.A., Reid, A.J., & Rooney, C.J. (2026).
Report title. Center for Research and Reform in Education, Johns
Hopkins University.

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INTRODUCTION

Overview of Sounds of Success

Sounds of Success is an instructional approach designed to strengthen the phonemic awareness foundations that support early word reading and spelling. The program focuses primarily on phoneme-level blending and segmenting, the phonemic awareness skills most strongly linked to decoding and encoding development. Instruction integrates phonemic awareness with print from the outset, helping students connect sounds and letters as they analyze and build words. Daily lessons serve as the instructional anchor and typically take 5–10 minutes to implement. Early in instruction, teachers provide the sounds for letters when students do not yet know them, and responsibility for sound retrieval is gradually released as students develop letter–sound knowledge.

Lessons emphasize accurate and continuous blending, careful control of phoneme count and phoneme type, and repeated opportunities for successful practice. Additional instructional supports—including explicit teaching scripts, guided transfer activities connecting phonemic awareness to reading and spelling, and targeted practice routines—can be layered in as needed based on student performance. A companion assessment system is used to monitor students’ blending and segmenting development, analyze error patterns, and guide instructional decisions so teachers can respond to student needs as they emerge.

Overview of the Evaluation

The set of analyses presented in this brief seeks to answer the research question:

Do students who are participating in the Sounds of Success program in the 2025-2026 school year exhibit foundational reading achievement growth from BOY to MOY on a standardized assessment?

The purpose of this document is to examine initial, descriptive trends of kindergarten literacy achievement for a sample of students who are participating in the Sounds of Success program in the 2025-2026 school year. Data comes from four kindergarten classrooms in two schools within the RSU14 Windham Raymond School District in Maine.

METHOD

Research Design

This is a descriptive study of the effect of the Sounds of Success intervention on

kindergarten literacy skills. Analyses compared student scores at beginning-of-year (BOY: September 2025) and middle-of-year (MOY: January-February 2026) administrations of the assessment. All students in the analytic sample are participating in the Sounds of Success program; there is no comparison group in this study.

Participants

Data for this evaluation comes from RSU14 (Windham Raymond School District), a medium-sized district in Maine that serves approximately 3,100 students across 6 schools in the communities of Windham and Raymond. The student demographic makeup of RSU14 is 90% White, 2% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 6% another race. Approximately 3% of families in the district are economically disadvantaged (NCES).

Analyses reflect data from 66 kindergarten students enrolled in four classrooms within two schools in RSU14.

Measures

The study team gathered and analyzed student achievement data to address the study's research question.

Student achievement. Student literacy skills were measured by three dimensions of the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment: Phonemic Segmentation Fluency (PSF), Nonsense Word Fluency: Correct Letter Sounds (NWF-CLS), and Nonsense Word Fluency: Words Recoded Correctly (NWF-WRC).

DIBELS is a set of brief standardized measures used to assess key early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. Each subtest targets a specific foundational reading skill, allowing educators to monitor student progress and identify areas where additional support may be needed (University of Oregon, 2023).

DIBELS assessments are predictive of later reading success. The assessment has been reviewed for its reliability and validity to ensure it accurately reflects student progress in early literacy skills (Good et al., 2004). DIBELS scores are reported as benchmark goals, which indicate whether students are on track for future reading success, and are often used to inform instructional decisions within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. *Intensive Support* indicates that a student is at high risk for reading difficulties and requires substantial, targeted intervention to make adequate progress. *Strategic Support* reflects moderate risk, suggesting that the student may benefit from supplemental instruction in addition to core classroom teaching. *Core Support* identifies students who are meeting grade-level expectations and are likely to remain on track with typical classroom instruction. *Core^ Support* represents students performing well above benchmark expectations, indicating strong foundational skills and minimal risk for reading difficulties (University of Oregon, 2023).

Analyses focused on subtest scaled scores and corresponding benchmark goal

statuses. Data did not include any student-level demographic characteristics. Based on subtest-level nonresponse, the analytical samples varied across dimensions: $n = 64$ for PSF, $n = 63$ for NWF-CLS, $n = 63$ for NWF-WRC.

Analytical Approach

The analysis examined changes in students' literacy performance from BOY to MOY within the Sounds of Success program. Because this was a descriptive evaluation without a comparison group, the primary focus was on changes in the distribution of students across benchmark categories over time. We calculated the percentage of students meeting each benchmark level at BOY and MOY and quantified how students moved between categories; specifically, the proportions of students who improved (moved up one or more benchmark levels), declined (moved down), or remained in the same category. These transition patterns provide a clear picture of how students' literacy skills shifted during program participation.

To complement these categorical analyses, we also examined changes in students' subtest scaled scores using paired-samples t-tests. These tests estimated whether average scores increased from BOY to MOY for all students in the sample. Because the evaluation does not include a comparison group and does not adjust for covariates, these t-tests should be interpreted cautiously.

Procedure

The intervention was implemented for approximately 15 weeks prior to the DIBELS assessment window and was delivered by classroom teachers as part of daily literacy instruction. Teachers delivered brief daily lessons lasting approximately 5–10 minutes. Each lesson followed a consistent, parallel instructional structure for blending and segmenting. Blending instruction began with a short auditory warm-up designed to build automaticity with a lower phoneme count, followed by 1–2 minutes of additional auditory-only blending practice. This was followed by integrated phonemic awareness practice using slides in which graphemes corresponding to the phonemes appeared visually. Early in instruction, teachers supplied the sounds for graphemes as they appeared while students blended the sounds to say the word. Responsibility for sound retrieval was gradually released as students developed letter–sound knowledge. The same instructional structure was then repeated for phoneme segmentation: teachers said a word that appeared on the screen, students repeated the word and segmented its phonemes, and corresponding graphemes appeared as the sounds were segmented. Instruction progressed systematically from two-phoneme words to three- and four-phoneme words and controlled phonemes before generalizing to all phonemes.

Assessment data from the Sounds of Success phonemic awareness assessment system were used to determine instructional needs and guide additional support. Students who demonstrated difficulty with blending or segmenting received increased dosage (additional 15 minutes, 4x/week) and intensity (small groups of 2-4 students),

increasing practice with daily lessons and guided transfer activities connecting phonemic awareness to print. Teachers received approximately four hours of initial professional development focused on the research foundation of the instructional approach, instructional routines, and use of program materials. Literacy coaches conducted check-ins as needed with teachers to answer questions and support implementation. Student progress was monitored using both the Sounds of Success assessment system and the district's regular DIBELS assessment schedule, and program assessment data and error analysis were used to inform instructional adjustments. After the DIBELS assessment window, whole-class implementation continued for one additional week (week 16), after which the program resources were used primarily to provide targeted support for students who continued to demonstrate difficulty with blending or segmenting.

RESULTS

The following tables and narrative summarize the descriptive analyses conducted for this study, including benchmark frequencies at BOY and MOY, movement between benchmark categories, and paired-samples t-tests examining the changes in scaled scores across test administrations. Tables 1-3 show the BOY and MOY Benchmark Distributions across the three DIBELS subtests.

Table 1
PSF Benchmark Distributions, BOY and MOY

Benchmark	BOY Frequency	BOY Percent	MOY Frequency	MOY Percent
Intensive Support	18	27.3	0	0
Strategic Support	21	31.8	0	0
Core Support	19	28.8	12	18.8
Core^ Support	8	12.1	52	81.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>66</i>		<i>64</i>	

Table 2
NWF-CLS Benchmark Distributions, BOY and MOY

Benchmark	BOY Frequency	BOY Percent	MOY Frequency	MOY Percent
Intensive Support	43	65.2	8	12.7
Strategic Support	14	21.2	8	12.7
Core Support	8	12.1	20	31.8
Core^ Support	1	1.5	27	42.9
<i>Total</i>	<i>66</i>		<i>63</i>	

Table 3
NWF-WRC Benchmark Distributions, BOY and MOY

Benchmark	BOY Frequency	BOY Percent	MOY Frequency	MOY Percent
Intensive Support	0	0	4	6.4
Strategic Support	57	86.4	4	6.4
Core Support	9	13.6	24	38.1
Core^ Support	0	0	31	49.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>66</i>		<i>63</i>	

Across all three subtests, the benchmark distributions show a clear upward shift from BOY to MOY, with fewer students remaining in the Intensive Support or Strategic Support categories by MOY. PSF shows the most dramatic change, with all students reaching Core or Core^ levels, while NWF-CLS and NWF-WRC also reflect notable movement into higher benchmark categories. Taken together, these descriptive patterns suggest a general trend toward stronger foundational reading skills within this sample.

Tables 4-6 depict movement summaries, which show how students' benchmark statuses changed from BOY to MOY for each literacy subtest. These tables show the percentage of students who moved up to a higher benchmark category, stayed in the same category, or moved down.

Table 4
PSF Movement Summary, BOY to MOY

PSF Movement	Frequency	Percent
Moved Down	0	0
Stayed the Same	9	13.6
Moved Up	57	86.4
<i>Total</i>	<i>66</i>	

Table 5
NWF-CLS Movement Summary, BOY to MOY

NWF-CLS Movement	Frequency	Percent
Moved Down	1	1.5
Stayed the Same	12	18.2
Moved Up	53	80.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>66</i>	

Table 6
NWF-WRC Movement Summary, BOY to MOY

NWF-WRC Movement	Frequency	Percent
Moved Down	4	6.1
Stayed the Same	9	13.6

Moved Up	53	80.3
<i>Total</i>	66	

Across all three subtests, at least 80% of students moved up one or more benchmark categories from BOY to MOY, indicating a general pattern of foundational reading improvement within this sample. Most remaining students stayed in the same category, and only a small number moved down, suggesting that declines were uncommon in these data.

Table 7 presents paired-samples t-tests comparing students' BOY and MOY scaled scores for each DIBELS subtest, providing a statistical check on whether average scores increased over time.

Table 7
Paired-Samples t-tests, BOY to MOY, Across Subtests

	BOY Mean (SD)	MOY Mean (SD)	Mean Difference BOY to MOY (SD)
PSF	5.59 (6.89)	59.56 (13.94)	53.97* (12.54)
NWF-CLS	3.84 (5.29)	33.60 (15.76)	29.76* (14.42)
NWF-WRC	0.30 (0.87)	9.14 (5.88)	8.84* (5.84)

Note. $N = 63\text{--}64$ observations. SD=standard deviation. * $p < .05$.

Across all three subtests, average scaled scores increased from BOY to MOY, and the paired-samples t-tests indicate that these gains were statistically significant within this sample. Because DIBELS scaled scores are designed to rise over the course of a school year, these score increases should be interpreted cautiously; students can show substantial score gains while remaining in the same benchmark category. As a result, the t-tests provide a descriptive check on score changes but have limitations in terms of practical meaning. Given the study's descriptive design and the absence of a comparison group, these results should be interpreted quite cautiously.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine whether kindergarten students participating in Sounds of Success demonstrated growth in foundational literacy skills from BOY to MOY. Overall, results show a consistent pattern of improvement across all three DIBELS subtests (PSF, NWF-CLS, NWF-WRC). Benchmark distributions shifted toward higher performance levels, most students moved up at least one category, and average scores increased significantly over time.

These exploratory findings provide preliminary, descriptive evidence of growth in

phonemic awareness and early decoding skills. Gains were especially pronounced in PSF, aligning with the program's emphasis on phoneme-level blending and segmenting. Improvements in NWF measures further suggest that students are developing the ability to connect sounds to print, a key goal of early literacy instruction.

In all, while these initial results are positive, they should be interpreted cautiously. The study's non-experimental design and lack of a comparison group mean that gains cannot be attributed solely to the program, as kindergarten students typically experience rapid literacy growth over the school year. The small, relatively homogeneous sample also limits generalizability, and the absence of subgroup data prevents deeper analysis of differential effects. Despite these limitations, though, the findings suggest that brief, explicit, and systematic phonemic awareness instruction integrated with print materials may support early literacy development. Future research using more rigorous designs and more diverse samples is recommended to better understand the program's impact and the conditions under which it is most effective.

Conclusion

Across all three literacy subtests, students in this sample demonstrated shifts toward stronger foundational reading skills from BOY to MOY. Benchmark distributions showed substantial movement out of the Intensive Support and Strategic Support categories, and most students improved by at least one benchmark level over the study period. These descriptive patterns suggest that students in this sample generally made progress on the specific early literacy skills measured by DIBELS. Overall, the findings provide an initial descriptive illustration of literacy growth among kindergarten students participating in Sounds of Success during the 2025-2026 school year.