Virginia’s Early Intervention Reading Initiative &
Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS)
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Virginia’s Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI) was established in 1997 by the Virginia Acts of Assembly (see Chapter 924, Item 40). The original intent of the EIRI was to recognize kindergarten or first-grade students in need of additional instruction to prevent later reading difficulties. EIRI has provided districts with the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), a screening tool that helps schools determine which students would benefit from additional literacy instruction. In March 2000, the General Assembly passed legislation to expand the popular initiative to include kindergarten through third grade.

During the academic year of 2000-2001, the Department of Education plans to disburse approximately 14 million dollars to schools across the Commonwealth for providing early intervention to students in need. Funding is based upon the cost of providing two and one-half hours of additional instruction, at a ratio of one teacher to five students. Currently, the funding formula is based upon a percentage of the number of students eligible for the federal free lunch program. Future funding will be based on the percentage of students identified in the first year of the EIRI expansion.

Four thousand and seven kindergarten teachers across 129 of Virginia’s 132 districts will participate in the EIRI this school year. Also, 110 of these districts are participating in the EIRI’s expansion program. This includes 3,543 first-grade teachers, 2,081 second-grade teachers, and 1,852 third-grade teachers.

Although a voluntary initiative, unique to Virginia, participation depends upon the following legislated conditions:

1. all students at the designated grade levels must be screened in the fall;
2. all students not meeting the fall screening criteria must receive intervention services that are in addition to their regular instruction;
3. all students receiving intervention services must be screened in the spring;
4. intervention programs, at the discretion of the local division, may include the use of special reading teachers; trained aides; volunteer tutors under the supervision of a certified teacher; computer-based reading tutorial programs; aides to instruct in-class groups while the teacher provides direct instruction to the students who need extra assistance; or extended instructional times in the school day or year for these students.

Persons delivering the intervention services must have appropriate training.

As previously mentioned, the PALS has been the statewide assessment instrument for the EIRI. The original PALS (now PALS-K) was revised and is currently used for the screening of kindergarten children only. Researchers at the University of Virginia developed a new assessment for screening students in grades 1-3. The Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening for grades 1-3 (PALS 1-3) is designed to provide specific information about children’s knowledge of fundamental literacy components.

Tasks on PALS 1-3 stemmed from the latest literacy research, Darrell Morris’ *Early Reading Screening Inventory*, and the *Book Buddies Assessment*. In addition, test items were selected due to their relationship to the Virginia Standards of Learning for English. Tasks, items, and benchmark scores were derived from pilot testing with 679 students in the state of Virginia.
Specifically, PALS 1-3 assesses phonological awareness (i.e., sound blending and segmentation), basic print skills including alphabet recognition and letter sounds, spelling, concept of word, word recognition in isolation, and word recognition in context. PALS 1-3 not only identifies children who are relatively behind in acquiring literacy fundamentals but also provides useful instructional information for all first, second, and third grade children.

The PALS website (http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/pals) has expanded to include a data entry component for scores from grades 1-3. Teachers are able to enter scores on-line and receive immediate feedback and summary reports. These reports can be used for planning instruction and are excellent resources for parent-teacher conferences.

Although the purpose of PALS is to serve as a screening tool for the EIRI it provides teachers with information about each student’s knowledge of literacy fundamentals. This is vital information to help ensure that children who are at risk for reading difficulties are given additional instruction and thus greater chances for success in academics and in life.

For further information please contact the PALS office at 1-888-UVA-PALS.