

Project Early Kindergarten child care partners

March 2008 focus group results

Project Early Kindergarten (PEK) is a Saint Paul Public Schools initiative that aims to improve the school-readiness of Saint Paul children. The program works to help close the achievement gap by offering high-quality educational experiences for preschool children. The program aligns pre-kindergarten education with the district's K-12 curriculum model, the Project for Academic Excellence. The model emphasizes standards-based education and extensive professional development. The program was first implemented in fall 2005 at 10 Saint Paul district schools. In fall 2006, PEK extended the program through a pilot child care component. As of March 2008, 10 schools, 4 child care centers, and 13 family child care homes offered the program.

The first cohort of partnering child care programs was asked to participate in PEK for two years, spanning the 2006-07 and 2007-08 school years. In the spring of the second year, PEK asked Wilder Research to conduct focus groups with these providers to gather their feedback on the program and suggestions for working with the next cohort. Seven child care center teachers and assistant teachers, 11 family child care home providers and assistant providers, and 3 child care center directors and assistant directors participated in the focus groups. Participants were also asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire at the end of their focus group session.

This summary report describes results of these focus groups and surveys. Major points emerging from the discussions and survey results are categorized into 22 themes, summarized here. Results provide the program with very positive feedback about child care providers' overall experience with the program and perceptions of the program's effectiveness. Results also provide the input program staff desired to inform programming decisions as it prepares to work with the second cohort of providers. Throughout this report, "directors" is used to refer to the child care center directors and assistant director participating

in the focus group. "Teacher" is used to refer to family child care home providers and assistant providers, as well as lead and assistant teachers at child care centers.

Major themes

Overall program impressions

In each of the three focus groups, participants provided very positive feedback about their overall experience with PEK. Almost all also plan to continue using PEK practices even after their formal contract with the program ends.

Theme 1: Teachers and center directors feel that PEK is a great program.

Theme 2: PEK is well-prepared and its materials are well-organized.

Theme 3: Center directors believe their centers have benefited from PEK.

Theme 4: Teachers and center directors would like to continue PEK practices and stay connected to the program.

Impact on children

Teachers and center directors perceive strong gains in children participating in PEK, and describe parents as being excited about the progress their children are making.

Theme 5: Children are making impressive gains in PEK and are better prepared for kindergarten as a result of PEK.

Theme 6: Parents are excited about the progress their children are making in PEK.

Theme 7: Children enjoy PEK.

Impact on teaching

Overall, teachers see themselves as better able to prepare children for school as a result of participating in PEK.

Theme 8: PEK has positively impacted teachers' instruction and helps teachers know how to prepare children for kindergarten.

continued

Professional development

Overall, teachers and center directors find PEK's professional development to be very helpful. They also appreciate and are motivated by the goal-setting aspects of the program. Due to teacher turnover, though, a number of teachers needed to begin working with the program without having first attended the in-depth two-day training. They found it challenging not to have a broad program overview upfront. Most teachers would prefer separate monthly training sessions for centers and homes, although a couple of family providers value joint meetings as well.

Theme 9: Overall, teachers and center directors find the program's training and coaching to be very helpful.

Theme 10: Teachers appreciate and are motivated by the goal-setting aspects of the program. Some might benefit from additional help in this area.

Theme 11: Center teachers would like more opportunities to attend the two-day training.

Theme 12: Family child care home providers feel it is important to receive an overview of the program before delving into specific aspects.

Theme 13: Center teachers prefer separating center and home teachers in monthly trainings. Feedback was more mixed among family providers, although a majority prefers separating the groups or at least combining less frequently.

Additional program supports

Teachers and directors also discussed areas where PEK might be able to provide additional support. Center teachers would like more options for themes and activities, and greater integration of PEK and their center's requirements. Center teachers would also like full inclusion of assistant teachers in the process. PEK has offered its training and training stipends to assistant teachers, but it is not a requirement. Individual centers have had discretion over whether assistants attend. Family providers would like additional opportunities to gain ideas from other

teachers, and some would like additional adaptations for working in a home environment. Teachers and directors also raised some concerns about finding the time to fulfill program expectations.

Theme 14: Center teachers would like more options for themes and activities they can use in their classrooms.

Theme 15: Center teachers would like assistant teachers to be more included in the process.

Theme 16: It can be challenging to integrate PEK requirements with the child care center's own requirements.

Theme 17: It is challenging for teachers to find the time to plan for the day and accomplish what is expected during the day.

Theme 18: Family child care home providers would like additional opportunities to gather ideas from other teachers and see what other teachers are doing.

Theme 19: Some family child care home providers found aspects of the program challenging in a home environment.

Theme 20: Center directors are concerned about the time that will be required of them in the role as the instructional leader at their center.

Other feedback

PEK uses Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs) to monitor individual children's early language and literacy development over time. Teachers generally find results from IGDIs to be helpful in informing their teaching and establishing small groups, although they have seen problems with testing administration when not done by PEK staff. Child care centers have found parent participation to be a challenge.

Theme 21: Teachers generally find IGDIs useful for informing their teaching, but question the results given problems with administering the tests. It can be helpful to have the coach administer the tests.

Theme 22: Parent participation can be challenging at centers.

Future direction

As PEK staff prepare to partner with the second cohort of child care providers, results from the spring 2008 focus groups provide very positive feedback about the experience of the initial cohort. These teachers and child care center directors were enthusiastic about the program and its impact on children. Almost all plan to continue using PEK practices even after their formal relationship with the program has ended.

Results also provide feedback that the program can consider in its ongoing efforts to inform and examine its practices. Some of the issues for consideration that were raised by focus group participants have already been taken into account in program planning for the second cohort. For example, the program plans to equip center directors to provide initial training to new teachers. The idea is to help teachers who start after the two-day training workshop better understand the program before entering the classroom.

Other areas of feedback reflect ongoing challenges that may be difficult to fully resolve. For example, the program has worked extensively with family child care home providers to find ways to implement the program that are sensitive to needs associated with working in a home environment. Program staff likely have a better understanding than researchers about whether more can be done in this area without compromising key components of the program. Still, the focus groups provide clear feedback that program staff can consider in their planning efforts. Following are issues for consideration:

- **Program overview for new teachers.** Due to high teacher turnover, a number of center teachers and family child care home providers were new to the program since the most recent in-depth two-day training workshop. As previously mentioned, the program already plans to address this issue by equipping the second cohort of center directors to provide initial training to new teachers. Based on focus group feedback, it seems it will be important for directors to be able to provide teachers with a solid overview of the program. Having assistant teachers attend the two-day training may also be helpful, since it seems
- assistants are often promoted to lead teacher status when a lead teacher leaves. It may also be important to ensure that new center teachers and family child care home providers are comfortable referring to the PEK implementation manual. Program staff can also explore whether it is necessary and feasible to take additional steps such as offering a version of the in-depth two-day training during the year.
- **Full inclusion of assistant teachers.** Based on feedback from center teachers, participating centers may want to consider fully including assistant teachers in program expectations and professional development. PEK has offered its training and training stipends to assistant teachers, but it is not a requirement. Individual centers have had discretion over whether assistants attend. More fully including assistants would likely involve additional resources upfront, but may help preserve program knowledge in a classroom if the lead teacher leaves and the assistant is promoted. It also seems that in a number of cases assistants are helping with and at times leading the teaching. Fully including assistants in training and coaching may also facilitate communication between lead and assistant teachers and help alleviate center teachers' concerns that it can be challenging to find time to plan for and accomplish daily expectations. In making changes in this area, it seems it will be important to provide assistants with clear expectations upfront about their participation in coaching and training sessions.
- **Clearly defining instructional leader role.** Center directors expressed some concerns about the amount of time that might be required for future directors to assume the role of the PEK instructional leader at their child care center. Plans for directors to assume this responsibility seem important in light of the concerns these plans are intended to address. The instructional leader role also reflects a key component of the Project for Academic Excellence model on which PEK is based. In the focus group, it seemed that concerns could be somewhat allayed by clarifying the reasons for assuming the role and what will be involved. As PEK works with the new cohort of directors, it

seems it will be important to provide a clear idea upfront of what the role entails, why it is important, and what teacher training the program will still offer.

- **Separating teacher groups.** Staff may want to consider continuing to arrange opportunities for center teachers and family child care home providers to connect with and learn from each other, but perhaps with less frequency than every other month. Most teachers would prefer to attend more of the monthly trainings with their peer group only due to differences between the two environments. They discussed how meeting separately facilitates discussions that are more focused on the needs unique to their group.
- **Support with goal setting.** Center teachers and family child care home providers provided positive feedback about the goal-setting aspects of PEK and the helpfulness of the assistance they received with establishing goals. A majority strongly agreed with a survey statement that they received enough support with goal setting, and most others somewhat agreed. Still, responses seem to indicate that some teachers could benefit from additional support with setting goals.
- **Administering IGDIs assessments.** Because teachers view IGDIs as an important instructional tool, it seems important to continue these assessments. Based on concerns with their administration, though, it seems prudent for PEK staff or other trained outsiders to conduct the assessments, and in particular at times IGDIs are administered to all children and used for research purposes. The program already plans to revert to program staff conducting IGDIs this spring. Communicating upfront that program staff will be assuming this responsibility may also help alleviate time concerns among future teachers and center directors.
- **Additional themes and activities.** Center teachers are given the complete *Doors to Discovery* curriculum to implement, in addition to the PEK child care implementation manual which covers the Early Childhood Workshop classroom framework. These teachers seemed very favorable about the curriculum, but also indicated it would be nice to have additional themes to choose from and, because children can go through them very quickly, additional activities. A specific request was made for a multi-cultural theme. PEK staff can consider whether it is feasible to provide additional themes, and whether additional activities could be provided or if there are ways to help teachers extend current activities.
- **Parent participation at centers.** It may be helpful to explore, perhaps even in conversations with center directors and teachers, whether there are additional ways PEK could encourage parent involvement at participating child care centers. Although they described parent involvement as a challenge, center teachers also enthusiastically spoke about parents' excitement over what their children are learning. Perhaps there are additional ways to build on that excitement and use it to encourage parent involvement.
- **Opportunities for family child care home providers to connect.** When prompted to offer suggestions, a couple of family child care home providers expressed interest in creating additional opportunities for providers to connect with and learn from each other. Program staff can explore whether additional opportunities can be created, such as arranging times for providers to observe each other's child care home environments.
- **Programmatic challenges in home environments.** It was clear from family child care home providers that feeling that their PEK coach understands the challenges they face and constraints they work under is very important to them and a key component of their satisfaction with the program. They greatly appreciated the coach's empathy and responsiveness to their needs. Program staff have worked extensively with providers to accommodate needs associated with working in a home environment. Nevertheless, some providers continue to struggle with implementing certain aspects of the program in ways that feel compatible with their living environment. Program staff are probably in the best position to determine whether more can be done to accommodate needs and alleviate time pressures while maintaining program integrity.

- **Integrating PEK and center requirements.** PEK staff are also likely in the best position to determine whether more can be done to integrate PEK and center requirements, given that PEK does not hold direct authority over centers. In their conversations with new directors, PEK staff may want to consider sharing teachers' feedback that integrating two curricula can be difficult, along with also conveying teachers' reports of their own and parents' enthusiasm about what children learn in PEK. It may also be worth considering whether PEK can provide any supports to center directors who may need to seek approval for implementing only the *Doors* curriculum.
- **Future focus groups.** The spring 2008 focus groups provided valuable feedback from the perspectives of child care providers partnering with PEK. These focus groups were conducted toward the end of the first cohort's partnership and will be used to inform work with the second cohort of providers. In the second cohort, program and research staff may want to consider conducting focus groups earlier as well, such as after the initial year.
- **Positive reinforcement for PEK coaches and staff.** Suggestions offered by focus group participants were given in the context of overall enthusiasm for the program. Participants provided very positive feedback overall about their experience with PEK, and about PEK's benefits to child care partners and children. In addition to informing future planning, focus group feedback can be used to acknowledge and commend the work and successes of PEK coaches and other staff.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the report *Project Early Kindergarten child care partners: March 2008 focus group results*. For more information about the child care component of PEK, contact Kate Bonestroo at Saint Paul Public Schools, 651-225-8984 or kate.bonestroo@spps.org. For more information about this report, contact Caryn Mohr at Wilder Research, 651-280-2678 or cam3@wilder.org.

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MAY 2008