

Project Early Kindergarten-Early Reading First Evaluation report on the first year of a Saint Paul Public Schools initiative

Program overview

The federal Early Reading First program provides financial support to transform early childhood centers into “centers of excellence” that promote language and cognitive skills and a strong early reading foundation. In 2006 Saint Paul Public Schools received a three-year, \$3.8 million grant through the initiative. Saint Paul used its funds to expand its Project Early Kindergarten (PEK) program to an additional two schools and two child care centers.

Project Early Kindergarten – Early Reading First (PEK-ERF) is a partnership between Saint Paul Public Schools, Wilder Child Development Center, and Bethel University King Family Foundation Child Development Center. The program provides pre-kindergarten education to 3- and 4-year-olds in Saint Paul, and targets those who are low-income, English Language Learners, or need Special Education services.

PEK-ERF takes a rigorous academic approach to early education, aligning pre-kindergarten education with the district’s K-12 academic reform model, the Project for Academic Excellence. The program emphasizes standards-based learning, extensive professional development, parent education and support, and a community-wide approach involving both schools and child care settings. Participating schools and child care centers implement the literacy-rich *Doors to Discovery* curriculum.

PEK-ERF served a total of 119 children during its first year of programming, from January 8, 2007, to July 31, 2007. The grant funds services through September 30, 2009.

Research methods

Wilder Research conducts an independent evaluation of PEK-ERF, working in conjunction with Saint Paul Public Schools’ Department of Research, Evaluation and Assessment. Research-based assessment tools measure children’s academic progress and classrooms’ support for language and literacy. Assessments conducted in the spring of children’s pre-kindergarten year also provide measures of their school-readiness.

Activities and results

In the spring, a federal site visitor found PEK-ERF “to be an exceptional program that is well on its way to achieving excellence.” The site visitor commended the program for its experienced staff and their diligence in program implementation, and for teachers’ commitment to the program. The program achieved a number of successes during its initial year:

- Almost all participants fell into one or more of the program’s three target categories.
- Overall, teaching staff were positive about their involvement with the program and its training and coaching.
- Teachers showed overall improvement in their early literacy knowledge.
- Observations found that overall, teachers provided strong emotional and instructional support to students, and actively engaged children in learning activities.
- Classrooms showed overall improvement in the extent to which they promote literacy and language development.
- All classrooms observed were found to have fully or partially implemented a majority of the indicators of alignment with the Project for Academic Excellence.

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- Compared to their peers nationally, 4-year-olds in both school and child care settings made faster progress in English receptive vocabulary on average.
- Based on teachers' ratings of oral language, reading, and writing, PEK-ERF participants appeared to make faster progress than peers in a national sample.
- Additional assessments measuring alphabet knowledge, print and word awareness, and other measures of early language and literacy also showed improvements for both 3- and 4-year-olds on average, although it is difficult to know at this point how progress compares to typical development.
- Some teachers provided feedback that they did not always have the supplies and props needed to implement the curriculum.
- Variations existed among classrooms in the extent to which they were literacy-rich, their alignment with the Project for Academic Excellence, and teacher-student interactions. Staff can use classroom-level results to target coaching to individual classrooms.
- Program staff can explore ways to boost school-based children's progress. Across assessments, children at school sites generally seemed to be further from attaining benchmarks than child care children. Differences could in part reflect the higher percentage of children at school sites with a home language other than English, and researchers will be examining that further in the future.
- The program can continue to work toward increasing parents' understanding of how best to support their children's learning, including how often they read to their children and allow their children to watch television.

Issues for consideration

PEK-ERF launched its initial program year with strong implementation efforts. Implementation is an ongoing process, and the program gathered valuable information during its first year on ways to continue strengthening these efforts. Staff can use the following evaluation insights to inform future planning.

- Based on feedback from teaching staff, the program may want to consider expanding the coaching that is provided to teaching assistants.
- Teachers communicated that future professional development can now delve deeper into program elements, and that they can also benefit from additional professional development on working with English Language Learners.
- Teachers voiced strong appreciation for opportunities to connect with each other, and program staff may want to consider additional ways to foster these connections.

Looking ahead

Data gathered during the second and third years will enable evaluators to assess the program's attainment of annual benchmarks when children attend a full year. Future evaluation results for PEK and PEK-ERF will also provide valuable information as the district pursues a larger initiative to ensure consistency across 4-year-old programs and to align them with the Project for Academic Excellence.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the report *Project Early Kindergarten- Early Reading First: Evaluation report on the first year of a Saint Paul Public Schools initiative*. For more information about PEK-ERF, contact Lisa Gruenewald at Saint Paul Public Schools, 651-225-8984 or lisa.gruenewald@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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