

## Project Early Kindergarten evaluation update

### General overview of results through 2007-08 of a Saint Paul Public Schools initiative

Saint Paul Public Schools' Project Early Kindergarten program aims to improve the school readiness of Saint Paul children. The program offers a rigorous academic approach and targets children who are English Language Learners, come from low-income families, or need Special Education services. Ultimately, the program intends to help close Saint Paul's achievement gap.

The program began in 10 Saint Paul schools in fall 2005, and expanded to community child care settings a year later. PEK has since become the model for pre-kindergarten programs district-wide. As of fall 2008, 28 district elementary schools, 8 child care centers, and 13 family child care homes offer pre-kindergarten programs following the PEK approach. School sites offer the program to 4-year-olds, and child care sites to 2½- to 4-year-olds.

PEK 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. With sensitivity to young children's developmental needs, PEK extends this model to early education, bringing children's preschool experience into alignment with the educational experience they will have in later years.

PEK is funded primarily by Saint Paul Public Schools and The McKnight Foundation, which provided an initial three-year grant in 2004 and renewed funding in 2007. PEK extends the program to child care settings through a partnership with Resources for Child Caring. The Minnesota Early Learning Foundation also contributes funds to the child care portion of the program.

#### ***Rigorous evaluation***

PEK participates in a rigorous, independent evaluation conducted by Wilder Research. Children are tested over time and in developmentally appropriate ways.

Evaluators compare children's academic and social skills in kindergarten and early elementary years to those of peers who did not participate in PEK.

#### ***School results***

As of fall 2008, data are available for the first two cohorts of PEK school children. On average, these students experienced the following initial changes:

- In the year before kindergarten, PEK Cohort 1 children made faster progress than their peers nationally in vocabulary and early reading and writing skills, and expected progress in early math. Cohort 2 made even larger gains on average than Cohort 1 and faster progress than their peers nationally in all four areas.
- When they reached kindergarten, both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 had academic skills that were substantially more advanced than those of similar, same-age children in a comparison group who had chosen but not yet received PEK.
- Both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 also showed advantages compared to their kindergarten classmates, with differences stronger for Cohort 2. In all four academic areas assessed, Cohort 2 scored significantly higher on average than both classmates with and classmates without prior preschool or child care center experience.
- Teachers' ratings in kindergarten also suggest that overall, PEK tended to enhance social skills, lessen problem behaviors, and improve academic competence more than other experiences that classmates had prior to kindergarten.
- Between fall of kindergarten and fall of first grade, the academic and social advantages that Cohort 1 children seemed to gain from PEK appeared to lessen somewhat on average, although PEK students continued to show academic advantages over classmates without preschool or child care center experience.
- Principals, teachers, and parents provided very positive feedback about PEK.

*Continued*

### ***Child care results***

Having started a year later, PEK's child care component is at an earlier stage. As of fall 2008, data are available for 4-year-olds who participated in the child care component's first year. At this point, results are more suggestive than conclusive. On average, 4-year-olds in child care Cohort 1 experienced the following changes:

- Upon kindergarten entry, PEK child care Cohort 1 children appeared to have an advantage over classmates who did not participate in PEK on some academic measures, especially vocabulary.
- However, PEK school-based children appeared to have a slight advantage over PEK child care children on three of the four academic measures in kindergarten.
- In the areas of social skills and problem behaviors, child care Cohort 1 children did not appear to have any advantages compared to kindergarten classmates. Again, results were more positive for PEK school children.
- Overall, child care teachers provided very positive feedback about their experiences with PEK.

### ***Issues to consider***

A core component of PEK is the inclusion of an ongoing evaluation that can be used to inform programming. Based on results available to date, following are several issues that can be taken into consideration in future planning for PEK school and child care sites.

A complete list of issues for consideration and "lessons learned" to date from the evaluation are provided in Wilder Research's full report.

- PEK's impact on academic and behavioral skills was found to be larger in the second cohort of school-based children than the first. This suggests that PEK's benefits have increased as it has become more fully implemented, supporting the value of the program model. As the study continues, it will be instructive to see if impacts continue to increase as the program matures further.
- The success of PEK in increasing the skills of participants can result in larger skill differences between them and their classmates when they reach kindergarten. To ensure that all children are able to achieve substantial advances in kindergarten, it seems important that kindergarten instruction be differentiated to varying skill levels. Kindergarten teachers might find additional training and coaching in this area to be helpful.
- At this point results are available for only the first cohort of children participating in the child care portion of PEK. These results seem promising in some areas and also suggest room for improvement. PEK staff are using what they have learned to make program changes in their work with the second cohort of child care providers. It will be important for the study to examine whether results for children improve due to these changes.
- Particular attention may need to be paid to the social skills and problem behaviors of children at child care sites. PEK staff can consider whether child care teachers could benefit from more training in this area.
- Some PEK school principals and teachers expressed concerns about current busing arrangements, such as young children riding with older children or being dropped off without an adult present. These concerns should be addressed.

**Wilder  
Research**

[www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org)

451 Lexington Parkway North  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104  
651-280-2700; FAX 651-280-3700



#### **For more information**

For more information about PEK, please contact Ann Lovrien at Saint Paul Public Schools, 651-793-5447 or [ann.lovrien@spps.org](mailto:ann.lovrien@spps.org).

For more information about this report, please contact Dan Mueller at Wilder Research, 651-280-2711 or [dan@wilder.org](mailto:dan@wilder.org).

Authors: Caryn Mohr, Dan Mueller, Edith Gozali-Lee  
SEPTEMBER 2008