

Project Early Kindergarten-Early Reading First

Evaluation report on the third 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 160 children during its third year of programming, from September 1, 2008, to July 31, 2009. The grant funds services through June 30, 2010.

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

The program achieved a number of successes during its third year:

- Most 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.
- Observations found that overall, teachers provided strong emotional support 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 implemented a majority of the indicators of alignment with the Project for Academic Excellence.
- Classrooms showed strong implementation in curriculum and instruction, and classroom environment components.
- 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.

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- 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.
- 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.

Issues for consideration

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

- Based on feedback from some teaching staff, the program may want to provide coaching support on strategies to group students for small group instruction. Teachers also need support on working effectively with behavioral issues.
- Teachers communicated that they enjoyed learning by watching videos of teaching, visiting each other's classrooms, and sharing ideas with other teachers. They felt that all these activities were helpful to their own teaching. Program staff may want to consider additional ways to foster these connections.

- Program staff can explore ways to boost children's progress. Across language and literacy assessments, 4-year-old children at child care sites generally seemed to be further from attaining benchmarks than 4-year-old children at school sites.
- The program can continue to work toward increasing parents' understanding of how best to support their children's learning, including how often they take their children to the library and check out books, and allow their children to watch television.

Looking ahead

Future evaluation results for PEK and PEK-ERF will also provide valuable information as the district works 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 Project Early Kindergarten-Early Reading First, Evaluation report on the third year of a Saint Paul Public Schools initiative. For more information about this report, contact Edith Gozali-Lee or Dan Mueller at Wilder Research, 651-280-2700. Authors: Edith Gozali-Lee and Dan Mueller
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