

Project Early Kindergarten-Early Reading First Final evaluation report on 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.

From 2006-07 through 2009-10, Project Early Kindergarten – Early Reading First (PEK-ERF) operated as a partnership between Saint Paul Public Schools, Wilder Child Development Center, and Bethel University King Family Foundation Child Development Center. The program provided pre-kindergarten education to 3- and 4-year-olds in Saint Paul, and targeted those who were low-income, English Language Learners, or needed Special Education services.

PEK-ERF served a total of 164 children during its fourth and final year of programming, from September 1, 2009, to May 31, 2010. Following their participation in PEK-ERF, the schools and child care centers will continue to participate in the PEK program.

Mirroring PEK, PEK-ERF applied 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 emphasized 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 implemented the literacy-rich *Doors to Discovery* curriculum.

Research methods

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

Activities and results

The program achieved a number of successes during its program years:

- 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 and instructional support and classroom organization.
- Classrooms showed overall improvement in the extent to which they promoted 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.
- Generally, program implementation results were stronger in the later years than the first year.
- Compared to their peers nationally, 4-year-olds in both school and child care settings made faster progress in English receptive vocabulary on average.

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- 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.
- Generally, student achievement results were higher in the second and third years than the first and fourth years.
- Program staff can explore ways to boost children's progress. Across language and literacy assessments, 4-year-olds at school sites made more improvements than 4-year-olds at child care center sites. Shorter programming days may contribute to the lower student results in 2009-10 than in the previous years.
- 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 how often they allow their children to watch television.

Issues for consideration

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

- 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 may want to figure out a way to help teachers better incorporate assessments into their lesson plans, rather than viewing assessments as a separate activity.

Looking ahead

PEK-ERF evaluation results can provide valuable information as the district continues to work with community child care providers to offer the PEK program. Results can also be used to help ensure consistency across 4-year-old programs in the district and to align them with the Project for Academic Excellence.

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451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700
www.wilderresearch.org



For more information

This summary presents highlights of the Project Early Kindergarten-Early Reading First. For more information about this report, contact Edith Gozali-Lee at Wilder Research, 651-280-2700. Authors: Edith Gozali-Lee, Caryn Mohr, Dan Mueller
AUGUST 2009