

Project Early Kindergarten evaluation

Results through 2008-09 of a Saint Paul Public Schools initiative

The Saint Paul Public Schools' Project Early Kindergarten program aims to improve the school readiness of Saint Paul children and, ultimately, to help close the achievement gap. 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.

The program began in 10 Saint Paul schools in fall 2005, and expanded to community child care settings a year later. Project Early Kindergarten (PEK) has since become the model for pre-kindergarten programs district-wide and the program within the school system is now titled the Saint Paul Public Schools' Pre-Kindergarten Program. As of fall 2009, 29 district elementary schools, 10 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 had contributed start up 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 2009, data are available for three cohorts of PEK school children. On average, these students experienced the following initial changes:

- In the year before kindergarten, all three groups of children who completed PEK in its first three years of operation made faster progress than their peers nationally in vocabulary and early reading and writing skills. The second group of children to complete PEK (Cohort 2) also made accelerated progress in early math, while the first and third groups to complete PEK (Cohorts 1 and 3) made expected progress.
- When they reached kindergarten, PEK children had academic skills that were substantially more advanced in vocabulary and early reading and writing skills than those of similar, same-age children in a comparison group who had chosen but not yet received PEK.
- All three cohorts of PEK children also showed advantages compared to their kindergarten classmates, with differences tending to be stronger with each successive cohort. In all four academic areas assessed (vocabulary and early reading, writing, and math), Cohorts 2 and 3 scored significantly higher on average than both classmates with and classmates without prior preschool or child care center experience.

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- Teachers' ratings of children in kindergarten also suggested 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 and 2 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. In addition, children in Cohort 2 maintained advantages in early reading and writing skills over their classmates with preschool experiences.
- Principals, teachers, and parents provided very positive feedback about PEK.

Child care results

Because it started a year later, PEK's child care component is at an earlier stage. As of fall 2009, data are available for 4-year-olds who participated in the child care component's first and second cohorts. At this point, results are more suggestive than conclusive. On average, 4-year-olds in child care Cohorts 1 and 2 experienced the following changes:

- Upon kindergarten entry, PEK child care Cohort 1 and 2 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 reading and math in kindergarten.
- In the areas of social skills and problem behaviors, child care Cohort 1 and 2 children did not appear to have any advantages compared to kindergarten classmates. Again, results tended to be more positive for PEK school children.
- Overall, child care center directors, center teachers, and family child care home providers gave positive feedback about their experiences

with PEK and also offered some suggestions for further program development.

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.

- The success of PEK in increasing the skills of participants results in 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. Toward this end, PEK leaders began working intensively with four pilot schools to equip kindergarten teachers to differentiate their instruction based on children's incoming skill levels. As the study continues, we will assess whether this effort impacts children's academic skills.
- Particular attention may need to be paid to the social skills and problem behaviors of children at child care sites. Teachers received training on Positive Behavior Support at the beginning of the 2008-09 school year. PEK staff can consider whether child care teachers could benefit from more training in this area.
- PEK child care results are limited at this point, suggesting some program impact on children but also suggesting room for improvement. We anticipate more reliable results in 2009-10 when the larger third cohort of child care children begin kindergarten. While the first two cohorts were assessed in the fall of their kindergarten year only, Cohort 3 children are assessed both in the fall of their pre-kindergarten year and fall of their kindergarten year, permitting better analysis of program impact than in the first two cohorts.

For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Project Early Kindergarten evaluation: Results through 2008-09 of a Saint Paul Public Schools initiative*. For more information about this report, contact Edith Gozali-Lee at Wilder Research, 651-280-2676.

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