

Tackling the achievement gap through Project Early Kindergarten

Evaluation report after the first three years of a Saint Paul Public Schools initiative

Locally and nationally, a gap in academic achievement separates American Indian, Asian, Black, Latino, and White students, and lower- and higher-income students regardless of their race and ethnicity. The gap begins before students even start school. In 2005, Saint Paul Public Schools piloted Project Early Kindergarten (PEK) to bolster the school success of children at risk of poor academic performance. The program reaches out to English Language Learners, low-income children, and children needing Special Education services. In practice, most participants also represent racial or ethnic minorities.

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 takes a community-wide approach to strengthening early education, involving both school and child care settings. The program was first implemented in fall 2005 at Saint Paul district schools. Implementation in child care settings began a year later, in fall 2006. As of fall 2007, 10 Saint Paul schools, 6 child care centers, and 13 family child care homes offer PEK to 3- and 4-year-olds in Saint Paul.

PEK is funded by Saint Paul Public Schools and The McKnight Foundation, which provided an initial three-year grant in 2004 and renewed funding in 2007.

Rigorous evaluation

The program participates in a rigorous, independent evaluation conducted by Wilder Research. Children are tested over time and in developmentally appropriate ways. Evaluators compare children's skills in kindergarten and early elementary years to those of peers who did not participate in the program.

School results

Preliminary results for students participating at school sites in 2005-06 are promising. If results are replicated with students attending in future years, and if students show advantages through early elementary school, researchers will have a stronger basis for making claims about the program's impact. On average, students at PEK schools in 2005-06 experienced the following initial changes:

- In the year before kindergarten, they made faster progress than their peers nationally in vocabulary and early reading and writing skills.
- When they started kindergarten, they were ahead in vocabulary and early reading, writing, and math skills compared to demographically similar children who had not attended PEK.
- They were also ahead in vocabulary and early reading, writing, and math skills compared to their kindergarten classmates, who came from a variety of backgrounds.
- Kindergarten teachers rated them significantly higher than their classmates in social skills and academic competence.
- Principals and parents provided very positive feedback about the program.

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Child care results

Data is not yet available for children participating in child care programs, but structured site observations show the beginning of standardization among child care settings, and between child care sites and schools. While maintaining characteristics unique to their environment, these diverse settings are coming together in their approach to how they prepare Saint Paul children for kindergarten.

In phone interviews, all of the parents with child care children starting kindergarten in the fall said the child care teachers helped prepare their children for kindergarten. Child care teachers also reported that PEK made a significant impact on their teaching practices and in their program's ability to prepare children for school. Evaluators are in the process of assessing the kindergarten-readiness skills of children who participated during this first year.

Issues to consider

As the program moves into its second three-year grant period, evaluation results provide insights staff can use in planning. For example, initial results from PEK schools showed weaker gains for White students, who generally started the program with stronger skills. Therefore, the program may want to look at ways to strengthen differentiated instruction in small groups of students.

Additionally, gains in early math skills did not appear accelerated. With the introduction of a new math curriculum this year, future results should be monitored for whether children attending in later years experience larger gains.

Principals now see kindergarten as needing to address higher skill levels of incoming students. Schools are working to create greater linkages between PEK and kindergarten teachers.

In both school and child care settings, implementation varies across sites. Program coaches can use feedback from structured site observations to target their support to the needs of individual classrooms. At some child care sites in particular, coaches can help teachers more fully implement some of the basic program components now in place. Turnover among child care teachers also presents an ongoing challenge, and the program is working to strengthen recruitment and retention.

Looking ahead

Data gathered over the next few years will enable evaluators to draw inferences about changes that can likely be attributed to the program. The study's design and its use of nationally validated assessment instruments also allow researchers to compare PEK results with those of similar preschool programs around the country.

This information should be valuable as the district pursues a larger initiative to ensure consistency and quality across early childhood programs. The district's 2006-2011 Strategic Plan for Continued Excellence now specifies consolidation of all district 4-year-old programs in alignment with the Project for Academic Excellence as a key action step.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the report *Tackling the achievement gap through Project Early Kindergarten: Evaluation report after the first three years of a Saint Paul Public Schools initiative*. For more information about PEK, contact Ann Lovrien at Saint Paul Public Schools, 651-767-8128 or ann.lovrien@spps.org. For more information about this report, contact Dan Mueller at Wilder Research, 651-647-4619 or dan@wilder.org.
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NOVEMBER 2007