

Project Early Kindergarten evaluation

Summary of results through 2009-10 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. 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. Project Early Kindergarten (PEK) has since become the model for pre-kindergarten programs district-wide and is now titled the Saint Paul Public Schools' Pre-Kindergarten Program. As of fall 2010, 28 district elementary schools, 9 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.

A core component of PEK is the inclusion of an ongoing evaluation that can be used to inform programming.

Method

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 comparison groups of peers who did not participate in PEK to estimate program impact. As of summer 2010, data are available for three cohorts of PEK school children and for four cohorts of 4-year-olds who participated in the child care component.

School results and implication

Results indicated that PEK participants had a substantial advantage in academic and social skills over classmates upon kindergarten entry. This advantage tended to narrow later on, and may fade out by third grade based on results for the first PEK cohort.

On average, PEK students experienced the following advantages:

- In the year before kindergarten, all three cohorts of children who completed PEK made faster progress than children nationally in vocabulary and early reading and writing skills.
- When they reached kindergarten, PEK children had academic skills that were substantially more advanced than those of similar, same-age children in a comparison group who applied and were accepted for PEK, but who had not yet attended the program.
- All three cohorts of PEK children also showed advantages compared to their kindergarten classmates.
- Advantages between PEK children and their classmates tend 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 without prior preschool or child care center experience.

- 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.

PEK advantages over their classmates decreased over time.

- The amount of progress PEK students made on academic assessments between fall of kindergarten and fall of first grade as compared to progress made by their classmates varied by cohort and outcome. In some cases, PEK students made similar progress, and in other cases, they made less progress compared to their classmates, narrowing the gap between the groups. Nevertheless, PEK students continued to show academic advantages in first grade over classmates without preschool or child care center experiences, and in some cases, also maintained advantages over classmates with preschool experience.
- In fall of second grade, PEK children continued to have an advantage over their classmates in reading, but no longer had advantages in other areas assessed. Results indicate that, between fall of first grade and fall of second grade, PEK children in Cohort 2 (the only cohort with available data) made accelerated progress in vocabulary, expected progress in math, and slower than expected progress in reading and writing, on average. Their classmates made similar progress.
- Third grade student results were reported using the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment. Results show that former PEK children in the first cohort performed similarly to their classmates in reading and math in third grade. In addition, PEK children were similar to their classmates in social skills, as rated by their teachers, and in third-grade attendance.
- Principals, teachers, and parents provided very positive feedback about PEK.

To address this “fade out” and to ensure that all children are able to achieve substantial advances in later grades, it seems important that all grade-level instruction be differentiated to varying skill levels, and that, for PEK children, lessons taught in PEK are not repeated in kindergarten.

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.

Child care results and implication

PEK child care children exhibited some advantages over classmates when they reached kindergarten, but did not seem to perform as strongly as children who participated in PEK at school sites.

On average, PEK child care children 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. PEK child care Cohort 3 did not have a classmate comparison group, but performed similarly to children nationally on measures of academic skills.
- 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. Social skills results for Cohort 3 children show that their scores are similar to children in the national sample and higher than the previous two cohorts.
- Overall, child care center directors, center teachers, and family child care home providers gave positive feedback about their experiences with PEK.

Previously, children who participated in PEK child care had some advantages over kindergarten classmates in academic skills but not in social skills. This prompted the program to offer “Positive Behavior Support” training to teachers. Results were promising for Cohort 3 children who performed better than the previous two cohorts in social skills. The program may want to consider continuing and strengthening instruction and supports for behavioral management in child care settings.

Initially, the child care component evaluation focused on the professional development of providers and implementation of PEK practices in child care settings. Recently, interest in PEK child care outcomes and impacts on kindergarten readiness has increased. To strengthen the assessment of program impact, the following additions were made to the child care component of the evaluation: 1) student assessments in the fall of the PEK year so that academic progress can be estimated from fall of PEK to fall of kindergarten; 2) two cohorts of children, which happen to be larger in size than the previous cohorts, and 3) comparison groups of kindergarten classmates for those cohorts.

To learn more

This summary is based on the Wilder Research’s fall 2010 report that focuses on new evaluation results from the 2009-10 school year. A complete list of issues for consideration and “lessons learned” to date from the evaluation are provided in Wilder Research’s full report.

To read the complete report, visit www.wilder.org/report.html?id=2349

For previous annual evaluation reports, visit www.wilder.org/report.html?id=2101
www.wilder.org/report.html?id=2203

PROJECT EARLY KINDERGARTEN

PEK has been funded primarily by Saint Paul Public Schools and The McKnight Foundation, since it began in 2004. PEK extends the program to child care settings through a partnership with Resources for Child Caring. The Minnesota Early Learning Foundation has also contributed funds to the child care portion of the program.



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For more information

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