The McKnight Foundation Education and Learning Program PreK–Third Grade Literacy and Alignment

Formative Evaluation Findings

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These evaluation briefs were commissioned by **The McKnight Foundation** as part of its efforts to use research, field-building, and advocacy to increase the percentage of Twin Cities students reading proficiently by the end of third grade. Founded in 1953 and independently endowed by William and Maude McKnight, the Minnesota-based family foundation seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations through grantmaking, collaboration, and encouragement of strategic policy reform. In 2012, McKnight granted $11 million for education and learning in Minnesota. Learn more at mcknight.org, and follow McKnight on Facebook and Twitter.

Education & Learning Program:
Program and Evaluation Overview

About the Education and Learning Program

The goals of The McKnight Foundation's Education and Learning (E&L) Program are "to increase the percentage of students reading at grade level by the end of third grade and to increase access to high quality learning beyond the classroom so that all Minnesota's youth thrive."

To achieve its goal in early literacy, The McKnight Foundation uses a three-part strategy:

- Establish high-quality systems for literacy development from pre-kindergarten (PreK) through grade 3
- Gather, analyze, and share useful field data and diagnostics
- Undertake field-building and advocacy statewide to support a broad range of stakeholders and field leaders.

For this work, McKnight formed strategic partnerships with seven grantee schools in the Twin Cities:

- Andersen United Community School, Minneapolis Public Schools
- Jefferson Community School , Minneapolis Public Schools
- Saint Paul Music Academy, Saint Paul Public Schools
- Wellstone Elementary School, Saint Paul Public Schools
- Earle Brown Elementary School, Brooklyn Center Community Schools
- Academia Cesar Chavez, independent charter school
- Community of Peace Academy, independent charter school.

Each school is focused on dramatically improving results for readers across the PreK-3 continuum. The schools first received a one-year planning grant before submitting a three-year proposal to implement their plans to improve PreK–3 literacy outcomes. All seven schools are now in the implementation phase.

The McKnight Foundation partnered with the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute (UEI) to serve as the intermediary organization that directly oversees and supports the awardee schools and districts. UEI's work includes providing rigorous professional development on literacy and school improvement and implementing empirically based tools that are being used with proven success nationwide. UEI also is working directly with schools and districts to plan for sustainability of their work under the E&L Program.

The Education and Learning Program Evaluation

The McKnight Foundation hired SRI International (SRI) and the Center for Applied Research and Education Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota to evaluate the E&L Program in the grantee schools. The evaluation included only the grantee schools from Minneapolis Public Schools, Saint Paul Public Schools, and Brooklyn Center Community Schools. The charter school grantees are not included in the evaluation.

The key purposes of the evaluation are (1) to inform internal stakeholders of the successes and challenges of the work as it is under way so that adjustments can be made and (2) to share lessons learned from implementation with others working to improve the PreK–3 continuum and literacy outcomes for students. The evaluation team is collecting and analyzing data on teacher practice and on children's early literacy skills and third-grade reading achievement to assess improvements associated with the initiative.

As part of the evaluation, SRI and CAREI prepared briefs that summarized some of the key accomplishments and challenges that schools, districts, and UEI experienced working on this ambitious literacy initiative. The goal of the briefs was to provide The McKnight Foundation, UEI, the districts, and the E&L Program's National Advisory Board (ELNAC) with feedback on how to further strengthen the program's efforts and ultimately impact.

The attached briefs are on topics requested by the ELNAC:

- Developing PreK–3 Assessment Systems
- PreK–3 Alignment
- Supporting Dual Language Learners.

These briefs are based on findings from interviews conducted in November and December 2012 with district and school administrators, PreK–3 teachers (including dual language and English Learner teachers), and literacy coaches. A total of 62 personnel in the three districts and the five schools included in the evaluation were interviewed. The perspectives of school staff who participated in the interviews may not represent the full population of staff in those schools. The briefs also include the perspective of UEI staff providing technical assistance to the districts.

These briefs are a snapshot in time. They represent the work undertaken in the districts and schools through November 2012. Much has changed since then; those changes will be reflected in upcoming reports and briefs. Having multiple snapshots of this type of school-wide literacy reform effort will help illustrate how such an effort unfolds and will provide lessons on early and subsequent implementation.

Using the findings raised in these briefs, The McKnight Foundation and UEI have adjusted the initiative supports being provided to the districts and schools. Those updates are described at the end of this document.

Education & Learning Program:
Developing PreK-3 Assessment Systems

A key component of The McKnight Foundation's Education and Learning (E&L) Program is to help districts develop a diagnostic literacy assessment system from prekindergarten through third grade (PreK–3) to better inform instruction. The goal is for districts to establish effective data systems that provide timely information about student learning and inform teachers' instruction and thus help meet the needs of individual learners. The Urban Education Institute (UEI) has been working with the districts on developing PreK–3 literacy assessment systems.

Assessments Being Used

Two districts, Brooklyn Center Community Schools (BCCS) and Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), adopted the STEP (Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress) literacy assessment developed by UEI as part of the E&L Program. STEP uses a developmentally sequenced set of tasks that focus on the strategies and skills students need to become proficient, independent readers. It employs a set of leveled texts that increase in difficulty with each "step." Teachers conduct one-on-one assessments with students during which they record students' reading accuracy and fluency, observe their reading behaviors, and engage them in comprehension conversations. STEP identifies skills students need to work on and appropriate level texts for them to read, which teachers can use to tailor small group and other student instruction.

The adoption of STEP represented a big change for the two districts. Two years ago, BCCS used several different assessments across grades: IGDIs in PreK, DIBELS in K–3, and Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark System and Scantron in grades 4–6. In 2011–12, most PreK–3 teachers piloted STEP. In 2012–13, the school expanded the use of STEP to include grades PreK–6 and used Fountas & Pinnell only with students who tested out of STEP.

The MPS E&L Program schools shifted from using Fountas & Pinnell to STEP in its K–3 classrooms in 2012–13. At the PreK level, STEP did not replace assessments, including IGDIs and a portfolio, but rather was used in conjunction with them. Also, MPS piloted a Spanish version of STEP in its Developmental Dual Language classrooms.

Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) did not change assessments but used the data differently. SPPS used assessments that are part of the Mondo Bookshop Reading Program (referred to as "Mondo" by the district) in grades K–5. UEI helped kindergarten teachers to better understand and use the data produced by Mondo and to adapt how they deliver the Mondo assessments. The PreK classrooms used different assessments, including Concepts About Print. Also, in one of the schools, the two-way immersion classrooms used a Spanish literacy benchmark assessment (EDL-2), which is aligned with the Mondo English literacy assessment, because of their emphasis on Spanish instruction.

Impact of E&L Program on Assessment

All the E&L Program schools embraced the idea of using diagnostic assessment data to inform instruction and received cross-grade professional development from UEI on collecting and interpreting data for this purpose.

E&L schools used data to identify student needs and to inform instructional practices such as grouping students and determining teaching strategies. Teachers across the districts reported making changes to instruction based on assessment results. Specifically, teachers used data to group students and focus on particular skills. For example, STEP data illuminated instructional gaps, especially in higher order thinking skills. A literacy coach described the influence of STEP data:

> *It really has shown us the holes in our instruction that we didn't know about before… We never realized we were not teaching inference as effectively as we should be.*

Even though STEP is designed for PreK–3, by using it in grades 4–6, BCCS identified that two-thirds of the upper grade students had gaps in critical and inferential thinking skills. These gaps had not been diagnosed by other assessments.

While many teachers found assessment data informative, several MPS teachers reported that the new STEP data did not contribute to their instruction any more than previous assessments.

UEI played a key role in helping the districts establish their diagnostic literacy systems. UEI provided extensive professional development to BCCS and MPS on administering and analyzing STEP. In SPPS, UEI helped teachers to use existing assessments for diagnostic purposes by analyzing data and organizing results by instructional goals. SPPS teachers previously had not used Mondo data to inform instruction because they were given only a composite score rather than the more informative details. UEI trainers had to analyze and reorganize the Mondo data but were able to help SPPS PreK and kindergarten teachers, literacy coaches, and administrators use the Mondo data to inform their instruction. UEI was concerned that this process would not be sustainable because of how much time it took.

UEI trainers introduced instructional strategies and tools SPSS teachers could use to address student needs. UEI coaches gave SPPS teachers specific strategies to adopt in their classrooms, including being more intentional about what they teach and voicing those intentions to their students. In addition, UEI provided PreK and kindergarten teachers with more strategies to help students develop their Concepts About Print skills. For example, to build one-to-one correspondence when reading, teachers could have students point to each word using a dot strategy. To teach students the mechanics of reading, UEI shared the strategy of having students do return sweeping with their hands. Teachers also learned about developing oral language structures, and many anticipated using these new strategies.

In addition, UEI staff encouraged kindergarten teachers to do more group and independent work with students. UEI staff also suggested more flexibility with the curriculum to allow teachers to better meet the needs of individual students.

STEP training and implementation created across-grade conversations that were increasing teachers' expectations for literacy skills, aligning instructional approaches, and facilitating conversations with parents. With the introduction of STEP, teachers were asking each other about their expectations for skills such as reading fluency and comprehension. Several MPS respondents reported that despite difficulties with implementation (described in the "Challenges" section), they believed that expectations for children were rising because of STEP. BCCS administrators reported overhearing teachers having serious hallway conversations about the nuances of STEP. Teachers were using similar terms and employing common strategies introduced by UEI, and this was increasing coherence within schools. STEP also gave the staff a common language and a communication tool for working with parents. Teachers reported that they liked the clarity and specificity of information that STEP provides, which enabled them to communicate more effectively with parents regarding concrete activities they can undertake with their children to support literacy.

Teachers reported that students' literacy skills were improving according to the diagnostic literacy assessments. According to STEP results in BCCS, which was in its second year of implementation, literacy skills were improving in all grades, including PreK. Some teachers said their students moved up several "steps" at a time, which they attributed to having assessment data that highlighted the skills that needed reinforcing. Kindergarten teachers in one of the SPPS schools reported increases in their students' Concepts About Print scores. Staff members attributed this increase to their ability to make progress with students at a faster rate because they were able to identify specific areas to target and to give intentional extra support.

Challenges

BCCS and MPS encountered some STEP implementation challenges but were able to address most of them. All three districts reported challenges in using assessments to address the needs of individual learners, with teachers needing more training, time to plan, and more timely access to experts to help them with "just-in-time" needs.

According to school staff, the greatest challenge with STEP implementation was the amount of time it required. Teachers administer STEP by having students, one at a time, read through increasingly difficult texts to determine their current STEP level. Teachers reported that this process took more time than they anticipated (e.g., 30–40 minutes on average per student and 20 hours of classroom instruction per assessment window). Administration

time increased with class size, and teachers found it did not decrease even as they gained experience with the assessment. Some teachers felt that they were spending too much time away from instruction, while others felt the time spent was worth it for the information STEP provided.

To address this challenge, both BCCS and MPS gave each teacher a substitute for a day so the teachers could spend time conducting the assessments. Literacy coaches, the assessment coordinator, and the E&L Program coordinators also helped teachers complete their assessments and led small group instruction while the teachers assessed other students. Despite the additional help with administration, BCCS teachers still felt they did not have enough planning time to adequately incorporate STEP results into their instruction.

The timing and frequency of STEP administrations presented some challenges. Both BCCS and MPS scheduled four administrations of STEP for the school year. BCCS scheduled the first administration just two weeks after school began. The district found those assessments to be unreliable because of temporary summer learning loss, which was quickly recovered. Therefore, for next year BCCS decided three rounds of assessment would be sufficient and now recommends waiting at least four weeks after school starts before doing the first round of STEP assessments. MPS teachers also struggled with the first administration of STEP. Upon its completion, they reported not having enough time to learn how to use the data and implement instructional changes before the second round of STEP assessments was under way.

Problems arose in the piloting of Spanish STEP. Some teachers in MPS reported problems with the Spanish STEP materials, including spelling and grammatical errors. With the district changing to an earlier assessment window than planned, UEI did not have time to edit the materials. However, teachers appreciated how quickly UEI addressed the errors. Furthermore, teachers used two forms of the assessment: one that was developed around "authentic" texts and one that was a direct translation of English STEP texts. Teachers liked the authentic version but felt the difficulty of words in the translated version was not equivalent to the original English text. Teacher buy-in suffered because of these issues and some philosophical differences about the importance of phonemic awareness. Finally, the online system for Spanish STEP had some technical issues, but UEI worked quickly to fix them.

Staff reported needing real-time access to STEP experts when they were learning to administer it. Some teachers and administrators did not feel sufficiently supported by UEI when they encountered difficulties implementing STEP for the first time. Staff felt that local school leaders and literacy coaches lacked expertise in STEP, emphasizing the need for more timely support from UEI.

The wide breadth of STEP levels in the same classroom made small group work difficult. BCCS teachers found that students in a single classroom encompassed a wide range of STEP levels (8 to 10 levels), leading teachers to feel like they needed to operate that many small groups. The UEI coaches tried to reassure BCCS teachers that the range of STEP levels in a given classroom should narrow as they continue to use the program and suggested ways of combining students into mixed groups that focus on a skill rather than level.

School staff reported needing more professional development on instructional strategies. Teachers were being asked to use several instructional methods, such as differentiated small group learning and independent learning, but many were unfamiliar with these strategies and felt they needed more support in implementation. They also were learning to make text selections based on assessment data, to use new teaching strategies such as guided and shared reading, and to implement new classroom management techniques. With these numerous demands placed on them, BCCS and MPS staff reported feeling stressed and wanting more professional development.

Establishing local expertise among school leadership and literacy coaches was under way but would take more time. All three districts hired PreK–3 literacy coaches to support teacher professional development and build local expertise. In all cases the PreK–3 literacy coaches provided reinforcement for UEI professional development between trainings but did not yet provide the same expertise as UEI. For example, the BCCS literacy coaches were less familiar with STEP than some of the teachers who began using it last year, so teachers continued to see UEI as the true experts.

Multiple district initiatives made it hard for teachers to focus on the McKnight grant. SPPS and MPS teachers found it difficult to spend the time incorporating assessment information into their instruction because of competing demands from other initiatives (e.g., a new math assessment protocol in SPPS and Focused Instruction in MPS) and a lack of ongoing support in between professional development sessions.

Recommendations

Building a PreK–3 literacy system that informs instruction for individual students is complicated. At the time of the interviews, districts had made real strides in using STEP and Mondo to develop those systems, and UEI had been instrumental in supporting their efforts. Some potential areas for improvements include the following:

- **The Spanish STEP needs refinement.** The program needs to be further polished to achieve maximum buy-in from English Learner teachers. In addition, targeted professional development may help overcome any initial skepticism that exists among teachers who have philosophical differences regarding the best way to instruct dual language learner students.
- **Districts need help identifying strategies to reduce burden placed on teachers.** Some effective strategies for reducing the time that STEP administration takes away from instruction were identified through trial and error, and these should be supported and shared. Strategies include hiring substitute teachers to cover instruction in classrooms while teachers test, bringing in outside support from literacy coaches and other aides, and helping teachers select texts and categorize existing books in libraries by STEP levels.
- **Teachers could benefit from more training from their school, district, or UEI on effective instructional strategies.** Once-a-month or less frequent professional development sessions are not sufficient for providing the level of support teachers desire. Some teachers discussed needing summer institutes or other more intensive training opportunities.
- **School leaders could benefit from more training from the district, outside consultants, or UEI on the literacy assessments and the use of data to inform instruction.** Building leaders' and literacy coaches' expertise in the areas being taught by UEI will help them provide consistent and timely support to teachers and secure teacher buy-in. Further, building expertise among a team at each school will promote sustainability beyond the grant.
- **Teachers need more preparation time for using data when planning instruction.** The majority of teachers interviewed mentioned needing more time to work alone and with other teachers on analyzing and using assessment data to inform literacy instruction.
- **Mondo data need to be available in a format that supports teachers with instruction.** The high level of effort needed to sort and organize data from Mondo to inform classroom instruction is not practical for teachers or sustainable by UEI trainers. SPPS needs to incorporate more usable teacher reports into their Mondo system.

The E&L Program schools made considerable changes to their assessment systems so they have better information to guide instruction. However, they must now learn how to address the gaps that were identified in their implementation.

Education & Learning Program:
PreK–3 Alignment

A major focus of The McKnight Foundation's Education and Learning (E&L) Program is the alignment of standards, instruction, assessment, and professional development from prekindergarten through third grade (PreK–3). Alignment ensures that students enter each successive grade having the foundation and skills needed to succeed. It can reduce unnecessary repetition in instruction and allow for coverage of more instructional topics. Shared professional development across grade levels promotes common understanding of goals and outcomes, terminology, and implementation strategies, and facilitates greater communication and collaboration across teachers.

In districts housing many schools, changing policies and practices is complicated by the need to ensure that all schools are aligned with each other. Four of the E&L elementary schools are housed in two large districts that have many elementary schools (Saint Paul Public Schools [SPPS] and Minneapolis Public Schools [MPS]). These schools were in their first year of implementation. The fifth school, Earle Brown, is the only elementary school in its district (Brooklyn Center Community Schools [BCCS]). It was in its second year of implementation.

Alignment with Prekindergarten

A positive transition from PreK to kindergarten is an important precursor to proficient reading. The E&L Program helped districts make changes to their PreK programs that improved alignment of standards, assessment, instruction, and professional development.

Alignment was greatly facilitated when the schedules, calendars, and salaries of PreK teachers were commensurate with those of other teachers. For example, in fall 2012, BCCS aligned the PreK teacher salaries, calendars, and schedules with those of the K–3 teachers. These changes allowed PreK and kindergarten teachers to hold joint professional learning community (PLC) meetings, to participate in joint professional development activities, and to discuss students' transitions to kindergarten.

In MPS, salaries and calendars were aligned, and starting in fall 2012, PreK, kindergarten and grade 1 teachers began collaborating on data and instruction.

In SPPS, only PreK and kindergarten teachers participated in the E&L program in 2012–13, with grades 1 and 2 expected to join the initiative in 2013–14. PreK and kindergarten teachers had different prep times, but the district hoped to offer compatible schedules for those teachers in 2013–14. PreK and kindergarten teachers had the opportunity to connect at meetings with the UEI team, but they had not met outside those professional development activities.

Alignment of PreK with K–3 occurred through shared literacy coaches and other forms of professional development. Literacy coaches worked with teachers in grades PreK–6 in BCCS, with teachers in PreK–3 in MPS, and with teachers in PreK and kindergarten in SPPS (with grades 1 and 2 expected to join the initiative in 2013–14). The coaches aimed to help PreK teachers feel more connected to the K–6 faculty and to help kindergarten teachers incorporate more developmentally appropriate practices used in PreK classrooms.

Standards

Providing a well-aligned set of early learning standards from PreK through grade 3 that are used to inform instruction and assessment is vital for improving student achievement and setting children on a path to successful learning.

The introduction of Common Core State Standards was driving alignment of standards across grades and within districts. Last year, BCCS teachers identified 11 power standards from the Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) to focus on across grades. This year they refined their list based on needs identified from STEP[1] results. They incorporated the Common Core standards and STEP results into their report cards.

[1] STEP—the Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress—is a developmental literacy assessment for grades PreK–3.

SPPS also used the Common Core ELA standards and used the Mondo Bookshop Reading Program for developmental benchmarks, curriculum, and assessments. Because Mondo does not extend to PreK, the E&L Program coordinators aligned the PreK curriculum with the Common Core standards being used in kindergarten.

MPS was rolling out "Focused Instruction," an online system that includes curriculum guides, benchmark assessments, targeted professional development, and a student data system. It is aligned with the Common Core standards. In 2012–13, MPS began using Focused Instruction in kindergarten and grades 3, 6, and 9. Other grades and the PreK–3 developmental dual language program will be added in the next two years.

Assessments

The alignment of assessments created many opportunities for communication about literacy. Using different assessments at different grades made alignment more challenging.

STEP training and implementation facilitated across-grade conversations that aligned teachers' expectations for literacy skills. E&L Program schools in two districts (BCCS and MPS) used the STEP program, which helped to align their literacy assessments. Training in STEP resulted in teachers using similar terms and developing shared expectations for literacy skills. The adoption of STEP PreK–6 in Earle Brown contributed to increased alignment across the grades. An Earle Brown staff member explained the change due to STEP:

> *I see fourth- through sixth-grade teachers…having more conversations with teachers in second and third grade, as upper grades start to work with STEP to ask about data or assessments.*

In contrast, K–5, PreK, and dual immersion teachers in SPPS used different assessment systems, which hampered cross-grade alignment efforts.

The use of STEP promoted collaboration among regular classroom teachers and English Learner (EL) teachers. In BCCS, all dual language learner (DLL) students were tested with the English STEP. EL teachers helped assess children and taught small groups of students in classrooms during the literacy block. EL teachers met weekly with classroom teachers to help them plan their small group work. All K–3 dual language MPS teachers piloted the Spanish STEP, which promoted common language and expectations about literacy with teachers who used the English version.

One district aligned assessment through the higher elementary grades. BCCS chose to use STEP through sixth grade to create consistency and not lose gains made in the lower grades. Because STEP was designed for K–3, using it with grades 4–6 required identifying age-appropriate texts and teaching strategies tied to the STEP levels. Using a single assessment and balanced literacy framework from PreK–6 created a much more coherent conversation about literacy. By aligning assessment through grade 6, Earle Brown identified gaps in many grade 4–6 students' literacy skills that had not been identified by prior assessments or achievement tests.

Instruction

All the districts were working to implement new instructional strategies to create better alignment.

A schoolwide programmatic focus enhanced alignment efforts. Earle Brown had universally adopted a balanced literacy framework. This change was facilitated by the school's use of a single program, International Baccalaureate, and of a single model to address the needs of DLL students. Before receiving the E&L Program grant, some teachers relied heavily on the basal reader and curriculum, while others used a more balanced literacy approach that incorporated other materials. This reliance on multiple programs and approaches initially hampered alignment efforts. In 2012–13, the entire school switched to a balanced literacy framework that includes guided reading, shared reading, independent reading, instructional read-alouds, word study, and instructional writing. Teachers reported that this switch yielded common terminology and facilitated discussion across grades and classrooms.

Schools in one of the large districts were part of a districtwide alignment effort. Through its Focused Instruction effort, MPS launched a district-wide online instructional framework designed to align instruction PreK–12. Further, the focus of the E&L Program was to align instruction for DLL students across grades and schools. This work included the identification and adoption of research-based instructional models in K–5 that MPS will introduce

to PreK in the coming year.

Challenges

UEI provided across-grade professional development for staff at all E&L Program schools. Teachers in all districts reported satisfaction with the training but desired more support in the new instructional strategies that UEI is promoting.

School staff reported needing more support in using the balanced literacy strategies. Teachers were being asked to use new instructional methods, to learn new classroom management techniques, to individualize lessons, and to use assessment data to make text selections. Many felt stressed by the number of changes they needed to make and by the amount of planning time required for the new activities.

UEI, literacy coaches, and other school staff in BCCS were helping teachers implement balanced literacy by focusing on a few of the six types of literacy activities each year. Several teachers felt uncomfortable about not being trained immediately in all six areas. BCCS leadership emphasized that this is a slow process. However, more support from UEI or literacy experts at the University of Minnesota may be needed in the short run.

Teachers desired more professional development on how to co-teach and jointly plan. The alignment of instruction means that teachers need to work more closely together on lesson planning and co-teaching. Because the BCCS teachers were all using the same balanced literacy framework, they could benefit from co-planning in their professional learning community meetings, but they reported needing more help learning how to do this. Also, the new instructional models for DLL students used in BCCS and MPS involve co-teaching, but both EL and regular classroom teachers reported not having enough training on it before being asked to implement it.

Districts experienced challenges in establishing local expertise in school leaders and literacy coaches. All three districts hired literacy coaches to promote teachers' professional development and build local expertise. Finding enough qualified literacy coaches in BCCS was a challenge. The district hired two literacy coaches but was still looking for a third. The two literacy coaches in BCCS had substantial expertise, but in their first four months they were still trying to establish their credibility with teachers. UEI was seen as the true experts on STEP and balanced literacy. Also, the literacy coaches in BCCS were less familiar with STEP than some of the teachers. Several teachers suggested that further developing the expertise of coaches and school leaders in literacy would help strengthen the school's local capacity.

Teachers in all districts reported needing more time to prepare for new literacy activities. Despite having many new responsibilities, BCCS teachers lost half their planning time because of changes in the bus schedule. Teachers said having less time made it more difficult for them to meet with literacy coaches, plan for new literacy activities, and engage in joint planning with their colleagues.

At SPPS, teachers reported that they lacked adequate time to fully flesh out and use the UEI strategies in their classrooms. Several teachers said they were overwhelmed by the multiple initiatives and curriculum changes. One teacher reported that UEI distributed a "cap sheet" that recapped the book selection techniques and suggestions taught by UEI, but that teachers had not had time to look at it because they were so busy.

Teachers and school leaders in MPS reported being overwhelmed by several new initiatives, including new models for instruction of DLL students, STEP, and Focused Instruction.

Alignment of professional development was more difficult when schools housed multiple assessments and models of instruction. Some schools in SPPS and MPS operated both dual language programs and English-only programs. Assessments also differed by grade level and instruction program. UEI trainers found it challenging to provide consistent and efficient professional development when teachers were using different instruction models and assessments.

Recommendations

Complete alignment of standards, instruction, assessment, and professional development will take time, especially in districts housing multiple elementary schools.

Below are recommendations for addressing some of the alignment challenges. Some suggestions are already part of schools' E&L Program plans.

- **Continued focus is needed on PreK and K–**

3 alignment. Greater alignment between the assessments used by PreK and K–3 teachers in SPPS and increased opportunities for teachers in all the districts to meet together in PLCs and collaborate could help increase alignment across PreK and K–3.

- **Teachers could benefit from more frequent and intense professional development on shared instructional strategies.** To give teachers sufficient support, some teachers proposed having summer institutes or other more intensive training opportunities. School coaches also need to provide more support between UEI training sessions.
- **School leaders could benefit from more training on the literacy assessments and the use of data to inform instruction.** Building leaders' and literacy coaches' expertise in the areas being taught by UEI will help them to provide consistent and timely support to teachers across grades and to secure teacher buy-in. Further, building expertise among a team at each school will promote sustainability beyond the grant.
- **Teachers need more time and training to align instruction with other teachers.** They would like to be better trained on how to collaborate and plan jointly. UEI could develop facilitation protocols to help teachers with collaboration and joint planning.

The E&L Program districts and schools were making progress aligning standards, instruction, assessment, and professional development from PreK–3. However, in each area disconnects remain and additional supports could enhance implementation.

Education & Learning Program:
Supporting Dual Language Learners

The McKnight Foundation's Education and Learning (E&L) Program is helping districts examine and address the specific needs of Dual Language Learners (DLLs) as part of the effort to have all students reading proficiently by third grade. DLLs are enrolled in all five schools participating in the E&L Program evaluation, and in three of the schools they make up a majority of students (percentages range from 20% to 70% across E&L Program schools).

Current Models for Teaching DLLs

The three districts use different approaches for supporting the literacy learning of DLLs.

Brooklyn Center Community Schools (BCCS). In fall 2012, BCCS launched a push-in model of English Learner (EL) support for DLLs in grades K–6 based on the recommendation of UEI staff. In this model, DLLs received the same instruction as other students in the classroom. Students were clustered by ability (not DLL status) using STEP[2] assessment data for small group instruction, and EL teachers joined their classes for 20 minutes a day, most often to work with the lowest ability groups. All instruction, including that of the EL teachers, was conducted in English. EL teachers did not work with PreK classrooms, which also were taught in English.

Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS). SPPS used two different language instruction models. The first was an English-only model and was used in all classrooms in the Saint Paul Music Academy (SPMA) and in some classrooms in Wellstone. In the English-only model, EL teachers pushed in during reading and writing lessons at levels that matched the language needs of the students in the classrooms. EL teachers provided an intervention, the English Now program, for the lowest level DLLs. Also, the lowest level DLLs were pulled out for additional support. All instruction occurred in English, but Hmong-, Spanish-, and Karen-speaking teaching assistants provided scaffolding for students who spoke those languages.

In addition to English-only classrooms, Wellstone operated a Spanish two-way immersion program that served both native English-speaking and native Spanish-speaking students. Instruction in this model shifted progressively across the grades from almost all Spanish instruction in grades PreK–1 to a more balanced split between English and Spanish in subsequent grades. The goal was for students to be proficient in both languages by sixth grade. SPPS had both Spanish and English PreK classrooms.

Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS). MPS also used two different language instruction models. Its developmental dual language program, a Spanish immersion program, differed from the immersion program in Wellstone because it only served native Spanish speakers. The English language development English-only program, similar to the SPPS program, used both co-teaching (push-in) and small groups (pull-out strategies) with DLLs who speak Spanish or other non-English languages.

English as a Second Language teachers co-taught in the students' regular classrooms and pulled out DLL students with the lowest English skills for additional support. PreK classes were taught in English only, but the district planned to have Spanish developmental dual language PreK classrooms to better align with kindergarten.

Impact of E&L Program on DLL Approach

Interviews revealed widespread recognition that DLLs need more support through improved instruction. District administrators, principals, teachers, and other school staff were committed to trying new strategies that might improve DLLs' literacy outcomes. As a result, the districts adopted new models of instruction for DLLs and in one case, a new method of assessment.

[2] STEP—the Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress—is a developmental literacy assessment for grades PreK–3.

Two districts adopted new models of instruction for DLLs because of the E&L Program and the third refined its model. BCCS changed to a push-in model for EL instruction based on its work through the E&L Program. The push-in model represented a complete change in practice. A year ago, DLL students were pulled out each day for 45 minutes of separate instruction. Prior to that, pull-outs lasted 90 minutes. Pushing in was intended to promote more continuity in instruction for DLLs and decrease disruptions for them and other students.

The push-in model also helped to create a co-teaching environment. Classroom teachers and EL teachers attended professional development activities together and had joint planning time. On a pedagogical level, this enabled coordination of lesson planning and facilitated collaboration. On a practical level, some classroom teachers discussed the benefits of having an additional adult in the room and the support of EL teachers for both DLL and non-DLL students with low language abilities or skills. One teacher described the benefits of this approach:

> *[DLL students] used to be completely lost when they came back. We share students more, I feel. They get more frequent instruction and attention from adults. I feel like I know what's going on more.*

However, the new model garnered considerable criticism, especially from EL teachers, as discussed in the "Challenges" section.

Also through the work associated with the E&L Program, MPS staff identified evidence-based models of instruction. This strategic planning resulted in the district endorsing the developmental dual language model already being used at Andersen and replacing the model being used at Jefferson which had been developed by the school. Further, the district was looking at using the same model in PreK classrooms that feed into the developmental dual language kindergarten classrooms. In its two E&L schools, MPS changed the assessments it was using. MPS piloted the Spanish STEP with its Spanish-speaking students in the developmental dual language program and used the English STEP with its DLLs in the English language development program.

SPPS worked with UEI to further its goal of adding more oral language instruction, which is especially important for DLLs' literacy development.

There were more opportunities for EL teachers to collaborate with classroom teachers. In SPPS, classroom teachers, EL teachers, and teacher aides all participated in the same professional development sessions on language instruction that UEI provided. In BCCS, EL teachers started to attend weekly grade-level meetings with classroom teachers, participate in all of the UEI professional development sessions, and provide classroom instruction side by side with classroom teachers as part of the push-in model. These changes led to increased collaboration and communication between classroom and EL teachers.

Teachers found instructional strategies taught by UEI, while not DLL specific, to be useful with DLLs. Although interviewees indicated that UEI's professional development did not include DLL-specific strategies, teachers found that the strategies were particularly helpful with DLL students and other students with low language skills or special needs.

All three districts added staff who serve DLLs. BCCS added a fourth EL teacher to its staff to support the new push-in model. MPS increased its capacity to serve DLLs by hiring a bilingual facilitator (shared by the two schools) who is focused on helping to increase literacy program quality. Finally, SPPS hired eight new classroom aides so that each of the kindergarten classrooms in both E&L schools would have an aide to support language and literacy instruction.

Challenges

In addition to the positive impacts already mentioned, the changes in approach to teaching DLL students associated with the E&L Program created challenges the districts were trying to resolve.

Implementation of the new models created challenges and concerns. Use of the new push-in model had many of the Earle Brown staff concerned about the level of support DLLs were receiving and the fidelity of the model to research on effective push-in. A primary complaint was that 20 minutes a day was not enough time for the EL teachers to do any meaningful instruction, especially when the EL teacher may see students only a couple of times a week. Some staff mentioned that effective push-in models require at least 90 minutes of co-teaching a day. One of the EL teachers estimated that with their push-in model, EL teachers could miss serving up to

half of the DLL population, because students are sorted by ability and not DLL status.

Because there had been no training on how to co-teach and school leaders and staff had varying understandings of what it means to engage in co-teaching, the EL teachers felt that they operated more like classroom aides than co-teachers. UEI reported that these issues had been anticipated and discussed with school leaders. The challenges of time and collaboration were exacerbated by the fact that each EL teacher was trying to serve eight classrooms. Finally, having only a push-in model eliminated opportunities for DLLs to practice their oral language skills without their native English-speaking peers being present. BCCS leadership was aware of these challenges and was working closely with its staff and local literacy experts from the University of Minnesota to resolve them.

Similarly to teachers in BCCS, MPS district and school staff recounted difficulty in implementing co-teaching in both DLL instructional models without training on co-teaching and time for teachers to jointly plan. They also mentioned that class sizes can be very uneven. Developmental dual language classes were often rather small, while the English language development classes were too large.

Problems arose in the piloting of Spanish STEP. Some teachers in MPS were unhappy with the Spanish STEP materials. Because of the timing of the assessment window, there was not sufficient time for UEI to edit the materials and materials contained spelling and grammatical errors. However, teachers appreciated how UEI acknowledged the errors and worked quickly to rectify them. Also, teachers used two forms of the assessment: one that was a direct translation of English STEP texts and one that was developed around "authentic" texts. Teachers were unhappy with the translated version because they felt the difficulty of words was not equivalent to the original English text. In contrast, they liked the authentic version. UEI was working on more authentic texts, but this was going to take more time.

Another issue was the lack of common understanding between UEI and the teachers about what it meant to pilot the Spanish STEP. While teachers reported thinking they would be helping to fine-tune the materials, UEI reported that the pilot was also meant to gather data on the validity and reliability of Spanish assessment components.

School staff had questions about UEI's expertise with instruction for DLLs. There was a perception among some school staff that UEI may not have the needed expertise regarding EL reading instruction. Because of the difficulties with their new push-in model, some staff in BCCS reported that they need DLL experts beyond UEI to help them effectively implement a push-in model or consider another model. While UEI agreed that additional expertise would benefit BCCS, they pointed out that BCCS has not implemented the push-in model as they had proposed it. In MPS, teachers have lost some confidence and buy-in with advice regarding DLL students because of the mistakes made in the Spanish STEP materials, even though UEI worked fast to remedy them.

There were some philosophical differences in how to teach DLLs. Bilingual teachers in MPS disagreed with the instructional strategies embedded in STEP for teaching literacy to Spanish-speaking students in the DDL program. For example, many MPS teachers believed that focusing on syllables is more effective for teaching DLLs than focusing on phonemes. STEP, however, reflects recent research that suggests focusing on phonemes is just as effective for teaching reading in Spanish and makes it easier to subsequently learn English. In SPPS, a few teachers felt the UEI strategies did not take into account the cultural and language differences of DLLs who do not speak Spanish. One staff person explained this issue:

> *While some of the ELL practices are transferrable, I think the idea of just being able to generalize based on your research and your understanding of Spanish speakers is very different than the diversity of populations that we're supporting.*

More professional development on DLLs was needed. Even though improving the learning outcomes of DLLs is of major importance to the E&L Program, the only professional development districts received on DLLs was a session with a national DLL expert. The session focused on learning what the schools were doing in the area of EL instruction rather than suggesting strategies the schools can use. Because school staff felt the session did not provide them with helpful tools or recommendations, they did not pursue further support.

Recommendations

Extensive reforms in approaches to the instruction of DLLs were underway in BCCS and MPS. Both districts encountered challenges with the new models and strategies they were adopting and need support addressing various issues. Attending to these challenges will help to maintain teachers' buy-in for the reforms. Furthermore, SPPS may benefit from professional development focused on DLLs.

- **BCCS needs an expert or other support to help with the new push-in model.** Given the challenges being faced, immediate attention and support are needed to help staff make midcourse corrections. BCCS needs a DLL expert to look at how well their new push-in model reflects the literature on effective push-in models (e.g., number of minutes of instruction and number of DLLs to teacher per classroom) and what modifications and professional development may be needed to use this model effectively. Also, an expert could help staff consider other models, such as the hybrid push-in and pull-out models being used in SPPS and MPS.
- **Teachers would benefit from training on co-teaching provided by their own coaches with support from UEI.** Given that several of the instructional models for DLLs involve co-teaching, training and guidance on co-teaching are needed.
- **UEI needs to continue building support for the approaches underlying Spanish STEP.** For example, if phonemic instruction is a better approach, more teacher buy-in should be developed through discussions and sharing of research findings.
- **Districts need more support from a DLL expert.** All the districts need to look more closely at their various DLL models to make sure they are evidence-based and have fidelity to the models they are implementing. The expert could also help the districts develop action plans for monitoring and improving their current programs.
- **School staff should consider if English PreK classrooms need more support for DLLs.** EL instructors serve none of the PreK classrooms because funding for EL instruction is limited to kindergarten and higher grades.
- **School leaders in SPPS should consider whether their schools would benefit from support on instructional or assessment strategies for its DLLs.** Other than adding teaching assistants to the classrooms, the instruction of DLLs in SPPS did not change. Staff expressed some interest in getting more DLL related professional development.
- **UEI should consider focusing a Learning Institute on sharing approaches to literacy instruction for DLLs.** Given that all the districts are implementing a version of a push-in program, there is an opportunity for a shared discussion on the ways in which these programs are being implemented and their associated challenges and benefits.

The E&L Program schools recognized the importance of improving literacy skills among DLLs. Two of the districts changed their approaches to working with DLLs but could use more support through the E&L Program. The third district continued to use the same methods for instruction for DLLs with added staff but also could benefit from additional support.

Education & Learning Program:
Addressing Challenges and Recommendations

In response to the challenges and recommendations raised by the first year formative evaluation briefs, the E&L Program has changed some of the supports being provided to the districts and schools in the 2013–14 school year.

Developing and Implementing PreK-3 Assessment Systems

It is typical for the first year of administration of a new assessment such as STEP to present logistical challenges and to be time consuming as teachers are both learning to use a new tool and adjusting their instruction based on the data they receive.

To streamline the administration process and ensure materials of the highest quality, the UEI team has taken the following steps:

- The UEI team worked closely with school leaders to identify the best assessment windows, based on their experiences, during the first year of implementation.
- Through focus groups, the UEI team gathered extensive input from staff at Minneapolis Public Schools as a part of the Spanish STEP pilot. As a result, pieces of the assessment were edited and reprinted.
- The UEI team is working with Saint Paul Public Schools to ensure that useful data are available to teachers in a timely way and in a format that is useful for informing instruction.

To build the capacity of teachers and their instructional leaders, UEI is providing more frequent and targeted professional development through the following activities:

- UEI continues to provide robust professional development in each of the participating schools and the number of total support days has increased.
- With a full year of data now available, professional development is being intricately targeted to reflect the needs of each school and grade level.
- UEI is working with the schools to place greater emphasis on the role of literacy coaches and teacher leaders to serve as constant supports to teachers both in assessment administration and instruction.
- UEI has formed a literacy cohort and invited coaches and teacher leaders from each school to participate in high-level professional development on literacy instruction and coaching structures. This work is increasing the capacity at the building level so that continued data analysis and instructional growth can take place even when the UEI coaches are not present.

Supporting PreK-3 Alignment

In the E&L Program's second implementation year, UEI is focusing on tighter alignment across all the strands of work by implementing the following plan:

- UEI has established a literacy cohort and a leadership cohort to allow leaders the space and structure to examine the impact of this work across the PreK–3 continuum.

- Each school is using the results from its 5Essentials school survey as the framework for prioritizing its work.
- Each school principal is working directly with a leadership support coach who is aware of all the pieces of the work on the ground. The coach works with the principal to prioritize and align implementation of the E&L Program strands across the grades.
- Districts and school are continuing to include PreK and dual language learner (DLL) teachers in planning sessions, professional learning communities, and working groups to ensure alignment and consensus among all teachers.

Supporting Dual Language Learners

The McKnight Foundation is providing the E&L Program districts and schools with resources and experts to help them raise the literacy skills of their DLL students using evidence-based strategies.

- UEI has hired a full-time bilingual literacy trainer and expert in instructional strategies for DLLs to work across the E&L Program schools.
- At Earle Brown, national experts consulted with the leadership and DLL teams to work through the structure of supports provided to DLLs and to create opportunities for DLL teachers to co-plan and share instructional strategies with classroom teachers.
- As a result of this work with national experts, Earle Brown replaced the push-in model with a pull-out model in which English Learner teachers work with DLL students by STEP levels.
- As a part of the leadership cohort, school leaders will be visiting Union City Public Schools, a system that has been successful in closing the achievement gap for DLLs.
- The literacy cohort includes a focus on literacy instruction for DLLs.
- Using a new feature in the STEP data management tool, teachers and leaders are now able to differentiate data between DLLs and native English speakers, allowing for more targeted instruction and deeper understanding of the trends by school, grade, and classroom.

The E&L Program evaluation will provide continued feedback on the benefits and challenges of the initiative's supports as these new and strengthened strategies are put into action.

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