

Kindergarten Learning Gap

Involving parents and caregivers during the powerful early learning years from birth to age 5 gives young children an equal chance at success **By Lynn Fielding**

Public schools do not create the achievement gap. The five- to six-year gap in reading and math skills between students in the top and bottom quartiles—so painfully evident on the SAT and ACT at 11th grade—is rarely caused by our high schools, our middle schools, or even our elementary schools. Recent data from the Northwest Evaluation Association indicates that virtually the entire gap in language achievement and almost 70 percent of the gap in math achievement are created before the beginning of second grade and most likely between birth and kindergarten.

In Kennewick, Wash., about 20 percent of our students come to kindergarten with language and math skills typical of 2- and 3-year-olds. Another 20 percent come with the skills of 4-year-olds. Do the math. This means 40 percent of our students are already one to three years below grade level when they enter public school. They will continue to lag indefinitely unless we do something about it.

Back in 1996, Kennewick adopted a high but not unreasonable goal: 90 percent of third-graders will leave third grade reading at or above grade level. The board thought our struggling students were just a little bit behind—perhaps by half a year or, in rare cases, as much as a year. We thought we could bring them to grade level by fine-tuning our curriculum, tweaking our teachers' skills, or giving students a little more instructional time.

But when we implemented fall and spring testing in 1999 in first and second grade, and later in kindergarten, we realized our lowest-performing students were much further behind than we expected—and that closing our achievement gap would take a much greater effort than we had thought. When students enter kindergarten with language and pre-literacy skills three years below the average kindergarten student, they have to experience an extraordinary amount of growth each year for two, three, even four years. To bring these students up to grade level by the end of third grade, we had to produce as much as seven years of growth in the four years from kindergarten through third grade.

First, we had to ensure “annual growth”—an average year's worth of growth—in kindergarten and first, second, and third grades. The good news about annual growth is that students who achieve it do not fall further behind. The bad news is that, if they started behind, they don't catch up. They just keep their same place at the back of the line.

To reach our 90 percent goal, we also had to ensure that these students made three years of “catch-up growth.” In other words, on top of a year of annual growth, they had to make an additional year of growth in first grade, do it again in second grade, and do it yet again in third grade to read at or above grade level by the end of that year. If they made only annual growth but no catch-up growth in first and second grade, they would have to make as much as three years of

catch-up growth (on top of their annual growth) in third grade.

Four years of annual growth and three years of catch-up growth by the end of third grade sound daunting, but the reality is that all elementary principals must now perform this feat under NCLB requirements by 2014.

REACHING PREKINDERGARTEN PARENTS

Our initial strategy—waiting until kindergarten and then ensuring annual growth for all students and accelerated growth for students who are behind—only addressed part of the problem. Four years ago, Kennewick's school board, superintendent, and union leaders realized we would be perpetually reacting to the new wave of entering kindergarten students—40 percent of whom were one to three years behind—unless we got to the root of the problem. We decided to involve parents and childcare providers of children during the powerful early learning years from birth to age 5. The result was a program we call Ready! for Kindergarten.

Some 6,000 adults with children 5 and under have attended 90-minute Ready! sessions in the fall, winter, and spring over the past two and a half years. We train about 900 parents per session. During the sessions, we do five things:

■ First, we show parents the data on beginning kindergarten students and point out that those who begin behind typically stay behind. We explain that parenting practices from birth to 5 generally determine the academic quartile in which a child starts school. We offer support to families as they prepare their children to enter kindergarten with basic skills at or above grade level. We found parents are very receptive to information on how they can guide their children and enthusiastic about the free training. We also found they enjoy playing with a purpose and reading aloud with their children daily.

■ Second, we give specific answers to the question, “What should a typical 5-year-old be able to do when he or she begins kindergarten?” Here are our targets, or expectations, for language and literacy: Children enjoy being read to and can retell a story, know 12 to 15 upper- and lower-case letters and their sounds, memorize five to six nursery rhymes, hear ending sounds (rhyme) and beginning sounds (alliteration) in words, speak in complete sentences, and have a vocabulary of 4,000 to 5,000 words.

We also have simple math, social, and bilingual targets, such as counting in order from 1 to 20 and settling into new groups or situations. These targets are focused, narrow in scope, and highly correlated with success in reading and math by third grade. These targets do not include nutrition, safety, physical development, and other important aspects of early childhood that have indirect effects on third-grade academic outcomes.

■ Third, we share with parents specific age-level activities that can be done in five to 10 minutes a day. We break each of the incoming kindergarten targets into subskills, then se-



Parents in the Ready! for Kindergarten program learn how to play games and do other activities with their babies and preschoolers that will help the children do well once they get to kindergarten and beyond.

quence each skill at each age level back to birth. For example, to reach the target of knowing letters of the alphabet at age 5, parents do simple eye-movement games with their baby to develop the eye muscles needed for future reading. Parents show 1-year-olds how to feel and match the few simple shapes that form our alphabet with large wooden pieces. This activity wires the young brain for instantaneous recognition of these letter shapes in text. For children ages 2 to 3, parents decorate their home with many five-inch-high copies of the first letter of the child's name, followed by the rest of his name at age 3 and a few more letters at age 4.

We provide free tools, simple activities, and training to make the process manageable and fun for both parent and child. We encourage parents to read with their child 20 minutes a day from birth and spend five to 10 minutes a day with the program's targets, tools, and activities. We teach parents that connecting with their child begins with the interactive eye-contact and smiling “dance” shortly after birth. While the interaction becomes more linguistically complex as time goes on, it is still a dance, with each responding to the other and adding to the stream of interaction. The moment the parent or the child is no longer having fun, we tell them to stop.

We offer different fall, winter, and spring classes at each of the five age levels so the material is fresh while still building on the prior lessons. Parents who start with the newborn lesson will get 15 different sequenced training sessions, with tools and age-appropriate targets, by the time their child

starts kindergarten. Ready! provides its instructors, most of whom are community members and kindergarten teachers, with PowerPoint presentations featuring short video clips from outside experts.

■ Fourth, we assess to determine program effectiveness. We survey parents in the classes each year, and we collect voluntary logs of daily activities with their children. We assess each child on entering kindergarten. These simple assessments let us evaluate the impact of the Ready! program on the children whose parents have attended. The kindergarten assessment allows teachers to see specific initial skill levels in their students.

Our data shows some predictable but powerful trends. Over time, more parents of children birth to age 3 have attended sessions, realizing that they need to be involved early. Fathers have become increasingly involved with their children as they see that simple reading, talking, and reasoning activities are brain building, not merely babysitting activities. And attendance at sessions for Spanish speakers has in-

Too good a job?

"I THINK MAYBE your Ready! for Kindergarten program is working too well," a 60-year-old businesswoman said to me.

"Yeah?" I responded in my best professional attorney/school board member voice.

"Seems my niece was attracted to a motorcycle guy whose leather jacket and pants covered only part of the tattoos that cover about 85 percent of the rest of his body," she told me. "Seems they were kind of a match—with her pink spiked hair and all.

"We became concerned about the inevitable child," she continued. "I offered them a cheap little house on the back of the lot where I live where we could watch out for him/her and do what grandparents do nowadays. Sure enough, 11 months later, along comes the little one."

The businesswoman went on: "The out-of-state grandmother comes up to help out and stays with me. After a couple of weeks, she offers that we could look after the grandchild Saturday night so the two young parents could get out and spend a little time together, just the two of them."

"And ... ?" I say, subtly leading my witness.

"So they bring this tiny little baby over on the back of the motorcycle, and then the father goes back out and brings in their box of Ready! for Kindergarten stuff. 'Make sure you read 20 minutes to him from our books before you rock him to sleep,' he tells me. 'And let me show you how to do these eye tracking exercises you need to do as well.'"

She smiled. "Maybe you guys are doing too good a job with this Ready! For Kindergarten thing."

creased from a few parents to 100.

More low-income parents are attending as well. The free tools and activities (with a retail value of about \$65 per session) are a significant encouragement. Although we haven't collected data on this point, we think many negative attitudes toward school, rooted in childhood ("This is frightening. This is embarrassing. This is too hard"), are changing, encouraging parents to seek more learning for themselves.

And best of all, it's paying off. Eighty-five percent of students whose parents attended at least two sessions are meeting the standard on the incoming kindergarten assessment—35 percent more than those whose parents attend no sessions.

■ Fifth, we are sharing our powerful curriculum and tools with our community partners everywhere. We have adapted the curriculum for child care providers. We modified the lessons for teenage parents, the Headstart and Early Headstart programs, and our own district Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program.

CHANGING A CULTURE

We are changing our local culture to value skillful parenting. We did not create the Ready! for Kindergarten program because we are dripping with money. We created it because we are not. We think a dime spent on each child early on will save us a dollar by third grade and maybe 10 dollars by high school. Our initial data after eight sessions seems to bear this out. After two full years, we think we are recouping our investment.

Kennewick has a \$112 million general budget. Of that we spend \$12 million on special education and \$10 million on remedial education, plus we estimate that we reallocated another \$10 million inside regular classrooms as teachers spend discretionary time with students who are behind. This totals \$32 million—28 percent of Kennewick's total budget, or about \$5,400 per year extra for the 40 percent of our students who are behind. Even excluding special education, the cost for remediation would be 20 percent of our budget, or \$3,600 per student per year.

We can now say that enough students have already entered kindergarten at or above grade level to pay for the program at our normal remediation rates. But will the program pay off in terms of achievement as well? Will we reach our goal of 90 percent of students reading at grade level by the end of third grade? We have already moved from 57 percent to 88 percent, changing the future of thousands of students. Time will tell, but we're optimistic.

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Additional information about Ready! for Kindergarten is available at www.readyforkindergarten.org.

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