

## Spotlight on Authentic Assessment: Using a Pictorial Progress Monitoring Rubric

### School District of Janesville

What problems has Janesville solved?

- How to create and use a progress monitoring rubric to assess children's learning
- How to plan instruction based on individual children's developmental needs
- How to create an early childhood curriculum based on Vygotsky's theory of language and learning
- How to scaffold daily classroom instruction and use play plans and learning center scenarios
- How to help teachers understand and translate theory into classroom practice
- How to set up an early childhood program through community outreach

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The Janesville program was designed and funded as an Early Reading First program. This early literacy project is a partnership of the Janesville School District, Head Start, Even Start, and the Janesville Community Day Care Center. The program has three sites and five classrooms (one public elementary school classroom, two Head Start classrooms, and two day care center classrooms). The program serves approximately 200 3- to 5-year-old children, with a high percentage of the children living in poverty. There are 20 teachers and three literacy coaches (totaling two full-time positions). The elementary school site principal serves as the project director and a coordinator was hired to facilitate the set up of the classrooms, oversee program operation, and implement staff development.

When they established the program, Janesville reached out to the entire community with the understanding that it was “really important that we go beyond a regular school, that we look at other elements of the community that could be impacting on our school, which would be our Head Start program, as well as some of our day cares because. . .a lot of the cities are incorporating these facilities in their [early childhood] district programs. . . If we could show that we can create a collaboration that provides good scientifically based programs here and do it in a collaboration with the district, we'd be farther ahead when the district decides to do this as an initiative, maybe as a whole district. And now, three years later, that's exactly what's happening.” The coordinator explained, “The program is not a district initiative, it's really one school deciding that they wanted to do this. . .we wrote the grant with the intention of working with the outreach program. But our school district did not have anything to do with the actual . . . liaison work or collaboration, it was the initiative of the school principal and the Early Reading First grant.”

Janesville created their own curriculum focused on oral language and based on Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development, particularly the relationship between language and thinking. The program coordinator points out that the Vygotsky approach “is not a ‘how to do it,’ it's just

a theory and we have to apply it. We look to Vygotsky for how to set up the learning environment and incorporate play scenarios into our classroom learning centers.” Janesville has a formal core early reading instruction that they supplement with teaching in an authentic context, for example, children learn the sounds in words through a multisensory approach.

Children from poor families come to the Janesville program with language that is insufficient for them to develop imaginative play scenarios and to share activities with each other. Staff finds, especially at the beginning of the year, that the children “really need to be allowed to talk and express their feelings and their ideas within a structured way so that they can get their needs met. And through that process, they are developing phonological awareness skills, they are being exposed to really good language building in terms of receptive language, and also the expressive piece because [children are active participants].” It is important to teachers in this program that they see motivation to learn and curiosity in their students. “We’re providing opportunities through our practice to get them to learn that it’s a communication; writing, talking, and reading is communication. It’s not just something you memorize and then forget about, it’s really functional in your life and they use it that way and it’s pretty remarkable. . . Early reading instruction is constantly involved in their play and their everyday performance and it’s therefore in a context that they can take home. It’s not something they just learn because the teacher taught it to them.”

Janesville has developed an innovative way to monitor student progress in the classroom. In addition to standardized assessments such as the PALS and PPVT, the program has developed its own authentic assessments. The program coordinator explains, “Through our staff development and based on our writing and play scenario activities, we have a rubric that looks at all of the elements of early reading [including] children identifying sounds and symbols and reading back using a finger to track the writing that they do on their play plans. . . [We use these rubrics to] assess the quality of children’s play [and learning].”

Teachers use rubrics for progress monitoring every day throughout the year. The rubric helps teachers talk with children about their progress and keep a daily record of children’s learning throughout the year. Teachers use rubrics to document children’s performance and determine what additional scaffolded supports they need to perform at the highest level. The rubric is easily adaptable for tracking development in a variety of early reading skills. “The kids are writing a plan to go play in a learning center, the teacher is looking at the rubric and assessing where the kids are. . . what we are learning with this approach is that children’s independent level of performance is not where you’d say, ‘Oh, great. We did our job.’ No, that’s just the start of where we can take them to the next step and scaffold that learning. The rubrics are really the teacher’s way of learning, ‘OK, what would be the next step if a child is showing this much consistency, let’s say, in their writing, what do I do with it next—what’s the next step? What do I have to do?’”

Janesville has an intensive professional development program focused on helping teachers apply theory to practice. “[Our approach involves] a lot more teacher facilitation than it ever was before where [preschool teachers] just let the kids go play and [the teacher would] go do something else [in the classroom].” The coordinator has worked closely with a Vygotsky trainer, meeting monthly for three years. In addition to weekly staff development, every teacher has had at least three to four hours of training every month for the last three years under the coordinator’s guidance. The coordinator is developing guidelines to help teachers learn how to take the theory and apply it to everyday teaching—“This is the theory, these are the elements of good literacy practice, shared reading, and phonological awareness along with vocabulary and oral language. How do we get you to do it every day?” The program is helping teachers develop reflective practice to so they can better understand what they are seeing in the classroom. The next step for the program is to develop a mentoring model.

The program has demonstrated significant gains in student learning through both standardized and authentic assessment methods. “We’ve shown teachers the steps through various rubrics and more standardized assessments, too, but I would say the everyday just looking and teachers working in the centers with the kids, looking at what they’re writing and what they’re saying and what they’re doing [is most valuable in understanding what each child is learning].”

(Excerpts from School District of Janesville Interview)