

Spotlight on Coach-Teacher Partnerships and Training Teachers to Integrate Early Reading Skills into Daily Activities

Syracuse City School District

What problems has Syracuse solved?

- How to establish effective coach-teacher partnerships
- How to teach along a sequential, developmental continuum of phonological awareness skills and differentiate instruction
- How to integrate phonological awareness activities into daily classroom activities
- How to integrate early reading instruction into learning centers (e.g., the dramatic play area)
- How to plan and implement interactive shared book reading lessons
- How to provide high-quality classroom instruction through an inclusionary model to students from a high-poverty area, many of whom are English learners

The Syracuse Early Reading First program is administered through the Syracuse City School District, which provides strong support for the program. Pre-kindergarten is included in the district curriculum and pre-K and K teachers are trained in vertical teaming. The program's location in a high-poverty area with a large ELL population and an inclusionary education model has challenged staff in meeting the needs of children entering the program with varying language skills and at different developmental levels. "Our preschool program is fully inclusive so in this model there are some significantly impaired disabled preschoolers who are in the classroom, so those teachers are duly certified teachers that really are differentiating their instruction maybe far more than the classroom that might have children that receive a related service of speech and language or motor therapy."

Syracuse has five sites located in three public Reading First elementary schools with pre-kindergarten classrooms and two off-site, district-run pre-kindergarten programs. The program has 248 3- and 4-year-old children in nine classrooms with 22 teachers and assistants. Ninety-three percent of the children live in poverty; 79% are non-Caucasian; 22% have special needs; and 15% are English language learners.

Syracuse staff has seen the importance of teaching on a developmental continuum of phonological awareness skills and using this information to differentiate instruction. Teachers use the continuum both in terms of introducing activities into the classroom and in planning instruction for individual children. Teaching is based on each child's skill level, not on age. Teachers provide explicit and systematic instruction and immediate corrective feedback to children. Staff has learned to maximize learning using visual and physical cues.

Phonological awareness concepts are introduced in large groups but the program emphasizes that small groups are most important and provide teachers with opportunities to monitor the progress of individual children. "We might introduce something in a large group but we are

really emphasizing small group instruction or individualized instruction because that's where you really know what the child is doing and you're getting a more accurate and immediate feedback."

Phonological awareness permeates the day and is "daily and consistent." Instruction is provided through daily large-motor activities, through games, and in learning centers. Teachers also use informal approaches to instruction during snack time, transitions, and outdoors. Staff reports that "it's everywhere and it's fun and playful—signing in, clapping names, during opening routines." Teachers observe children integrating what they've learned into different play scenarios and conversations; for example, at choice time they are doing things they've been taught during a more structured part of the day.

Coaching staff finds that it is sometimes difficult to get teachers to focus on auditory aspects of phonological awareness, and targeted professional development activities have helped teachers to focus on sounds and integrate instruction into daily classroom activities. Teachers are encouraged to continually revisit and reinforce auditory work with students.

Teachers were trained in interactive reading during the first year of the grant. They use a variety of books including fiction and nonfiction, and have learned to select books with simple plots, limited words per page, and numerous illustrations, and to identify learning objectives prior to reading a story. When planning interactive reading lessons, teachers identify the prior knowledge and vocabulary of the children and prepare prompts and questions to engage children in discussion.

Syracuse encourages teachers to incorporate language instruction into thematic units. Professional development and coaching emphasize the importance of planning—knowing what your learning goals are, what you want to accomplish, and how you want to go about it. Teachers extend learning through activities related to story themes and value the use of "teachable moments" to broaden children's learning.

Preschool teachers in the Syracuse classrooms use lesson plans to map out a full day of classroom activities. The teacher first identifies instructional objectives and learning outcomes, then links activities to the objectives and program standards. The program also has adapted observation checklists to help preschool teachers monitor children's progress in mastering print awareness and comprehension skills within six thematic units. Teachers have used the checklists to plan phonological awareness instruction. For interactive storybook reading, the checklists help teachers track oral language learning across the curriculum, beginning with asking children to identify a book's title, author, and illustrator, and moving on to having them retell the sequence of story events.

This program has developed a three-year professional plan to provide extensive and ongoing teacher training activities with interconnecting components including coaching, study groups, small and whole group sessions, in-class modeling, and visitations to other classrooms. They provide a range of ongoing support for teachers (and teaching assistants) including coaching, mentoring, observations, and participation in local and national conferences. An important part of the Syracuse program is professional development for teaching assistants. "Another component that we have found strengthened the program is that we've been able to provide professional development opportunities for our teaching assistants. They're consistent in what they do in their understanding of what early literacy looks like [and this has been] a great boost to the teachers that they work with. . . We were even able to send them to a conference and then they—we have a rule that if you go to a conference, you need to present back to your peers—and they did a fabulous job and you could just see the growth before your very eyes. And it made people feel very important."

Syracuse stresses that each teacher is an individual and will respond differently to these various types of supports. “We’re in a very high-poverty area. All of the children who were in the grant were in a very high-poverty area in comparison to the children in the other classrooms we had. We had ELL. We have an inclusionary model. We had some special education and special needs children. We had a variety of teacher backgrounds, from brand new teachers to a veteran of almost 30 years. So we’ve had a lot of unique pieces to pull together and try to get everybody up on the same playing field.”

As the director explained, “It’s kind of hard to say what was the most important part of staff development because, again, each one of our teachers is an individual and certain types of staff development helped each one of them differently. . .So, some people improved through the use of a daily curriculum guide. . .Some people advanced through the coaching piece. . .[And some] liked someone to talk to and someone to observe them or co-teach with them, you know, to mentor them if you will. Our peer coaching piece was very successful, peer to peer, and for some people that was super. Going to national conferences and going to the sessions or being the presenter caused some people to really develop. For other people, we put a book in their hand. . .and they read it cover to cover and that advanced them. So it’s hard to pick the one thing because I think a good program has to have all those pieces.”

The Syracuse coaching program matches coaches and teacher teams, differentiates professional development plans according to teachers’ levels of experiences, and provides adequate time for making coaching work. The director reports, “Everything in the Early Reading First grant was supported through staff development . . .people coming together and working on a specific topic. We also had coaches who visited each individual teacher on a regular basis. We had a language specialist doing the same thing, as well as the facilitator. And then in the last year of the grant, we were able to advance to peer mentoring in addition to these other ways of helping staff improve instruction. People were able to go to conferences, national conferences, local conferences, and we were able to buy a professional library for their classrooms.”

The program provided teachers with the valuable opportunity to visit other classrooms. “Every month the teachers would meet and this year—we’re a large district, so spread out, so our offices are in one location—but this year we took those meetings to other sites so that staff also had that opportunity to visit each other’s classrooms and we could meet everybody’s needs, [for example] visual learners had the opportunity to touch and feel. Those classroom visits were successful this year and appreciated by our staff versus just coming to a meeting location and having staff development done in that setting.”

Peer coaching is a vital part of the Syracuse program. It began with staff development and training, including assessing classroom needs, developing strategies for supporting individual teachers, and determining the type of language used in coaching. “We actually had a staff development piece where we met monthly and our staff was trained in peer coaching by our district peer coaching person and so they learned the techniques of. . .how do you work with another adult, and how do you look at things in a classroom that might need growth and how do you approach that, and how do you support that, and what kind of language do you use. Teachers learned all that and then coached each other and went out into some of our other classrooms [where we are disseminating information]. . .and were able to do some peer coaching there.”

Syracuse administrative staff views peer coaching as critical to furthering the sustainability of the program. “We looked at the peer coaching approach as we entered this last year of the grant to really help to solidify that concept of sustainability. Our district superintendent is a firm believer that you can’t stay within your own four walls in the role in jobs that we have, that we have to be out interacting, interfacing, seeing and having those professional, collegial dialogues and discussions. So, you know, that’s a strong initiative of his. It’s not always easy to do that. . .we had a mixture of response to how that was received and carried out but overall

the feedback from our staff was that they appreciated the opportunity and found great value in the visitations and the discussions with their colleagues.”

The Syracuse City School District has supported the early childhood program from the beginning, and the district and pre-K program work developed a working partnership. “The district embraces pre-K through 12 for their instructional focus. This year the district’s rewritten their English Language Arts curriculum to encompass pre-K through 12 and, actually, we were able to take a lot of our learning through the Early Reading First project to really solidify what that pre-K curriculum looks like for our 3- and 4-year-olds. So we really work hand in hand together. And, again, being in our elementary schools, we’ve had some classrooms do some vertical teaming, where our pre-K teachers are meeting with kindergarten teachers. So, again, the supports, the connections to the buildings are in place. We also wrote a grant with some community partners on pre-K to kindergarten transition. So you know—pre-K is connected with our school district.”

(Excerpts from Syracuse City School District Interview)