

Spotlight on Implementation: Professional Development and Program Improvement

Wayne County Literacy Acceleration Project

What problems has Wayne County solved?

- How to make evaluation meaningful at the classroom level
- How to use data to make specific instructional improvements
- How to reach geographically isolated families
- How to ensure sustainability of a grant-funded program

The Wayne County Literacy Acceleration Project operates sites in three public elementary schools, including Early Reading First and Head Start classrooms. There are 12 classrooms and one mobile classroom, and 13 teachers, each with two aides, currently serving more than 230 three- and four-year-old children, primarily four-year-olds. The program is admirable for demonstrating significant gains in student achievement despite the challenges presented by its rural location and population.

The county is sparsely settled with only 13,000 people spread over more than 700 square miles. It is the second largest county in Tennessee with no major employment and high unemployment and dropout rates (40% of adults do not finish high school). Nearly 22% of the families with children under age five are below the federal poverty level. Over 2,500 students are enrolled in the school system from pre-kindergarten to grade 12.

The geography of the county led to the creation of the program's innovative "Skills on Wheels" mobile classroom, which functions as a Literacy Learning Center traveling the county and providing learning experiences for parents and children. The mobile classroom is staffed with a certified teacher, an educational assistant, and a family engagement coordinator. It travels year round offering the same type of instruction provided during the regular school term. The classroom can accommodate five students at a time, and each day the teacher works with a different group of children. Additional staff works with the parents outside of the bus program, for example, teaching the sounds of the English language.

The project's primary goal is to have every child enter school with strong literacy skills. The first year of the program they emphasized vocabulary skills and a developmental approach to teaching phonological and phonemic awareness. Instruction includes word and syllable awareness, rhyme and alliteration, and phonemic awareness, and the program provides numerous opportunities for the children to develop these skills in an environment that encourages them to have lots of fun while learning. Interactive reading is an ongoing classroom activity, which is best described by the preschool teacher:

"During our story time, the teacher reads and discusses a book and each book is read as many as four times. In the first reading, teachers give children a preview of the book while supplying information about the meanings of words and interpretations of key events. . .[We] read the

book without losing the flow of it. . . [and] quickly explaining the vocabulary words. And then in the second reading, the teachers work with children to reconstruct the book. . . [In the] third and fourth reading, children chime in or interact with the book through role play or other activities. And during the second, third, and fourth reading, we're able to ask open-ended questions during those readings because we don't want to lose the flow of the story during the first reading."

Two major sources of outside support have been critical to the program's success in providing a high-quality instructional program for preschoolers. They have received ongoing financial support and educational resources from the public school system and have benefited from the on-site collaboration they established with their external evaluators.

The early childhood education program began six years ago with just one classroom. From 2002–2005, Wayne County was involved in the Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research project, and in October 2004, they were awarded an Early Reading First Grant. From the beginning, the public schools have welcomed them into the system:

"So many times when you get federal money, regular teachers are not going to bother with you because you say, that's not going to last long. I'm not going to get into that. So many times you have to get what's left over. But that was not true here. When we got the principals and the system allowed us to have the best teachers in our system, then they gave us money to train. . . they've been very supportive in our decisions that we've made and they've been very welcoming to all — we have become a sort of a highlight for this area and we have people coming to visit us all the time."

The program's external evaluators from Vanderbilt University were instrumental in helping staff by working on-site and guiding the development of program improvement plans. Shirley Curry, the program director, reports that the "external evaluator. . . has done a marvelous, marvelous job in evaluating and working with us, working with our teachers, and training our teachers. . . [they] tell us where to get training and professional development."

To begin, the evaluators were informed about the program's goals and strategies, which contributed to the unique success of this partnership.

- Program developers were able to gain information that would assist in the design, implementation, and expected outcomes of the Early Reading First Program
- Evaluation measures were chosen collaboratively
- A proposal was jointly created
- The relationship was built on a prior partnership that developed trust between evaluators and practitioners/administrators

In addition, evaluator and program roles were clearly stated. Evaluators were expected to conduct assessments in a timely and efficient manner; clean, analyze, and summarize data immediately; provide feedback to administrators quickly in an understandable format; communicate information to teachers in an understandable format; and assist administrators in planning programmatic changes and/or professional development as a follow up.

In turn, the program was required to facilitate access to children for assessment at the site; provide ready access for classroom observation by the evaluating personnel; provide necessary and appropriate information as requested; maintain confidentiality; keep the evaluator abreast of any changes or unusual occurrences; and support the use of evaluation data by teachers.

The external evaluators' ability to use formative data to identify program strengths and weaknesses, drive professional development activities, and influence teaching strategies had a very strong impact on classroom practices. As a preschool teacher summarized, "I would say

the assessment by our evaluator has been so beneficial and not necessarily that they have trained us when they have come [to observe], but they have made us aware of some things that we might not be doing [and] that we weren't aware that we were doing. And we just become more focused and more aware when we realize that someone else is looking at us. We also have developed this system of teachers looking at other teachers. And I think when you're preparing for someone to look at you, you become aware of how you're doing things and you want to make sure you're doing it exactly right. I think that's been very helpful."

"The evaluators show us where our weaknesses are and they'll say: now here is your weakness. . . [for example] we had transition and how do you do transitions. We looked about how much of our time was being spent in lining up and how much time you wasted if you line up. . . and what do you do instead of lining up. . . So we had to bring in somebody who would do a good bit of work on transitioning from one activity to another. And then, of course, we're talking about transition from . . . pre-K to kindergarten and to first grade, that whole transition program. We had the people from the state to come down and do a whole workshop on how do you prepare the pre-K students to go into kindergarten and how do you prepare kindergarten to accept and know what they can expect from our pre-K students."

Through the evaluators, this project was able to target areas for program improvement and provide teachers with meaningful professional development activities. The director described staff training in phonological awareness instruction: "When we started, phonological awareness wasn't even a word we knew. We didn't call it that and we had to learn all of that. But we brought people in. . . [They came] in at the very beginning and spent two days with us — two or three days with us really working and explaining to us and to our teachers and to our aides, because I'm telling [you], our aides had to do everything that they did. . . [We learned about] phonemes. . . what are the sounds in the English language, how do they sound, and we practiced all of that. . . We practiced clapping out the syllables and clapping out all the. . . we just really spent a whole lot of time getting ready to [instruct] the children."

Another important reason for this program's improvement is that they have continued to follow up on professional development with on-site classroom support. As new units are introduced, literacy facilitators are available to meet with teachers to ensure that everyone is clear on what they will be doing. Staff reports, "We discuss during the meeting any changes that might need to be made. They will give us any new materials that we might need and that kind of thing. And with the new teachers, they meet more than they do with the teachers who have been in the program longer. And then will just come around to check with us to see what we need and then also we have a weekly meeting at our school and this is to discuss what's going on with a particular child, what we might need help with."

Wayne County's systematic and reflective program improvement efforts have resulted in significant pre- and post-gain scores for three years on language assessments including the Woodcock Johnson-III picture vocabulary, oral comprehension, and spelling subtests; the PALS upper case letters subtest; and the PPVT.

(Quotes from Wayne County Acceleration Project Interview with the project director and a preschool teacher)