

In August 2004 the Regional Education Cooperative VII was notified by the U.S. Department of Education of an award of \$1,630,058 to implement a three-year Early Reading First initiative designed to transform existing preschool programs into Collaborative Centers of Excellence in language and literacy in the Eunice, Hobbs, Jal, and Tatum public school districts in New Mexico. As envisioned, all children, including those with special learning needs, will benefit from exemplary pre-school programs where their progress, as measured by age-appropriate assessments, drives instruction.

This funded pre-kindergarten initiative articulates a plan of action that:

- Integrates scientific, research-based reading materials and literacy activities that immerse students in language and print-rich environments;
- Supports the age appropriate development of emergent and early literacy skills;
- Provides high-quality language and literature-rich environments;
- Provides for high-quality teacher professional development that includes instruction in research-based strategies, on-site coaching and mentoring, and peer collaboration; and
- Uses age-appropriate assessments to identify children who may be at risk for reading failure.

Special needs and regular education children benefit from full-day programs as they actively interact with teachers who are skilled in designing appropriate instruction and in working with English Language Learners (ELL). Supported by a coordinated professional development program, teachers provide instruction focused on specific language and literacy skills that scientific research shows to be positive predictors of learning to read—letter knowledge, phonological sensitivity, familiarity with the basic purposes and mechanisms of reading, and language ability (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Instructional planning is guided by age-appropriate assessments and daily observation of children’s progress. Instruction is delivered directly and explicitly to children in flexible groups—whole class, small groups, and individually.

Classrooms provide print-rich learning centers that incorporate adaptive technologies and that reflect the cultures of the children, with resources available in English and Spanish. These learning centers engage children in the exploration of knowledge domains they will study more formally when they enter kindergarten, which include language and literacy, science, mathematics, social studies, and the creative arts. Children also explore issues of health, safety, social, and physical development.

To provide a high level of service to low income and ELL students, the Centers have implemented an intensive home literacy program. Parents meet monthly in the schools during the school year and semi-monthly during the summer in community libraries. Parents are exposed to language and literacy activities they can use at home and are provided high-quality children’s books for building home libraries.

THE EDUCATION CENTER serves as the external evaluator for this initiative. Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the evaluation focuses on program effectiveness, alignment, coherence, and capacity building toward achieving the goal—children will enter kindergarten prepared to learn to read.

The evaluation examines the following outcomes:

1. Each year, the percentage of children entering kindergarten from the Centers prepared to learn to read will increase by 10 points over the preceding year, using the 2004-2005 Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)<sup>1</sup> scores as an initial baseline;
2. The percent of children who achieve age-appropriate benchmarks on the cognition subtest of the individual growth and development indicators will increase by 10 percentage points, as measured by the *Get it, Got it, Go!*<sup>2</sup> and letter naming task assessment;
3. The percent of preschool classrooms that achieve the maximum score of 21 on the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Literacy Environment (ELLCO)<sup>3</sup> *Writing Materials* and *Writing around the Room* subscales and a maximum score of 20 on the *Book Area*, *Book Selection*, and *Book Use* subscales;
4. The degree to which teachers provide scientifically-based reading instruction that incorporates screening and ongoing student assessments to accelerate the early language, literacy and pre-reading development of preschool children, particularly those from low income families and ELL students, as measured by the Observation Measures of Language and Literacy Instruction (OMLIT);<sup>4</sup> and
5. The degree to which the parents use language and literacy strategies at home to help their children develop appropriate language skills and build background knowledge and pre-reading comprehension skills, as understood through responses in focus groups and surveys.

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<sup>1</sup> The DIBELS is a set of standardized, individually administered measures of early literacy development.

<sup>2</sup> The alliteration and rhyming measures that compose the Cognition subtest of the Individual Growth and Development Indicators from the *Get it, Got it, Go!* is a normed test that has been subjected to validity and reliability tests by the test designer and publisher.

<sup>3</sup> The ELLCO Literacy Environment Checklist is a measure of the space and materials in a classroom that are devoted to books and writing.

<sup>4</sup> This battery of observation instruments was developed as part of the national Even Start study (CLIO: Classroom Literacy Interventions and Outcomes study). The OMLIT includes five instruments for observing early childhood classrooms.