

READY TO LEARN PROVIDENCE IS CHANGING OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

The research is clear: The quality of early care and education programs has a profound impact on the developmental outcomes of low-income children, and the quality of these programs is directly related to the professional development of teachers. In landmark studies, such as the HighScope Perry Preschool Study and the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention, researchers followed their subjects over several decades, finding that those who had participated in a high-quality preschool program achieved significantly greater academic and economic success than those in the control group. Specifically, children who participated in high-quality early childhood programs tended to have higher scores on math and reading achievement tests, greater language abilities, less grade retention, less need for special education or other remedial services, lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates.



Since 2003, Ready to Learn Providence has invested heavily in the professional development of early childhood educators working in center-based programs and licensed home settings in Providence. The overriding goal of the professional development has been to raise the quality of early childhood education programs that serve low-income children, and the primary focus of the professional training has been children's language and literacy development. The majority of this work has been funded with three federal programs – the Early Learning Opportunities Act, Early Reading First and Early Childhood Educator Professional Development.

To date, R2LP has trained nearly 2,000 early childhood educators, most of whom work in Providence. The impact of this professional development is now readily apparent. The classrooms and home-care settings of these educators feature materials and activities supporting early-literacy skills, providers are holding themselves accountable for literacy outcomes and – as the following pages demonstrate – the city's children are entering kindergarten better prepared.

These federal grants have differed in scope, but, like every R2LP intervention, all have stressed **depth, dosage and duration**. In other words, participants receive rigorous, scientifically-based coursework that allows time for reflection, collaboration with peers, and the application of new skills. Coursework is coupled with support from on-site mentors who help participants apply the material covered in class in their own settings, bridging the gap between knowledge and implementation.

R2LP Children Outperform Peers

Figures 1 and 2 display differences in early-literacy abilities at the start of kindergarten between children who had participated in an R2LP program prior to kindergarten and their peers who had never participated in an R2LP program.

Figure 1 shows that R2LP children were more likely to exhibit grade-level early-literacy skills than non-R2LP children. These data present an average across three years of kindergarten assessments – given in October of 2007, 2008 and 2009 – and provide compelling evidence of R2LP’s impact on the early-literacy skills of kindergartners.

Figure 2 shows that within the same cohorts of students, R2LP children were much less likely to need intensive early-literacy support in their kindergarten year than their non-R2LP peers.

The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, or DIBELS, was used to measure early-literacy abilities.

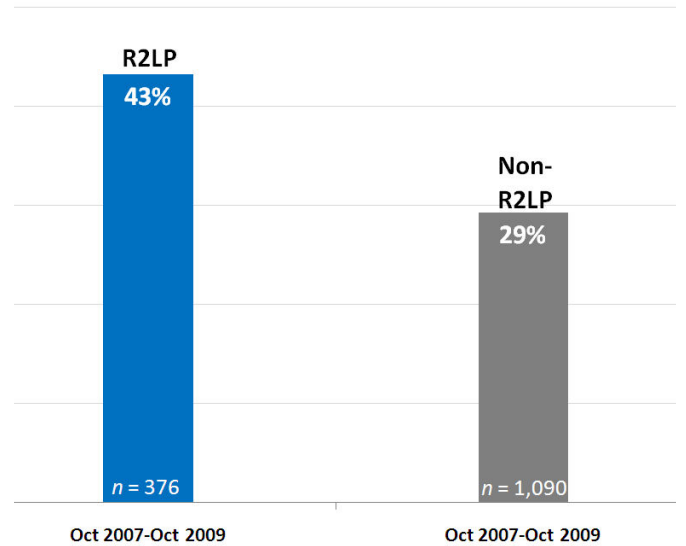
About DIBELS and PALS

The Providence Public School Department administers the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills to children in kindergarten through third grade in the fall, winter and spring of each school year. The instrument is comprised of seven fluency measures, five of which are used in kindergarten and/or first grade. These include initial sounds, letter naming, phoneme segmentation, nonsense words and oral reading. The DIBELS scoring system summarizes children’s performance on these measures as (a) Benchmark, i.e. at grade level, (b) Strategic, i.e. in need of additional intervention or (c) Intensive, i.e. in need of substantial intervention.

Prior to using DIBELS, PPSD administered the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening-Kindergarten (PALS-K) to children twice each school year – fall and spring. DIBELS replaced PALS in fall 2007. PALS-K comprises five sections – phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, letter-sound knowledge, concept of word, and word recognition in isolation. Scores within each section are totaled to reach a final “summed score.” If a student’s summed score falls below a PALS-determined benchmark score, it is recommended that the student receive additional weekly, small-group instruction.

Figure 1

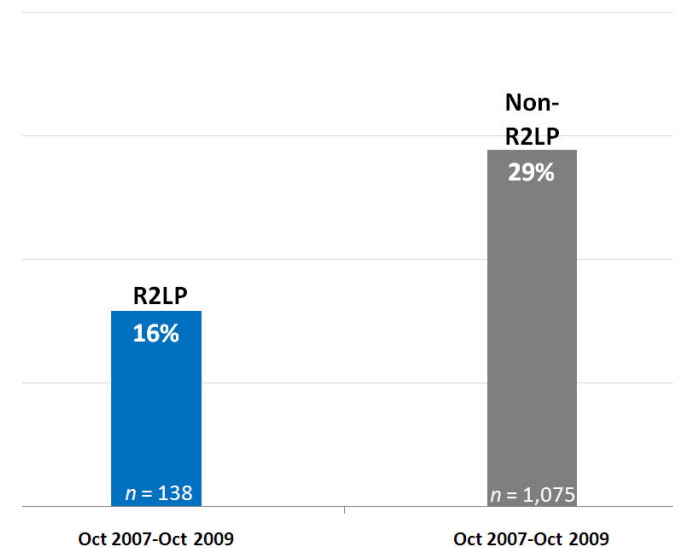
PPSD Kindergartners Meeting DIBELS Literacy Benchmarks, 2007-2009 Average



Sources: PPSD, R2LP

Figure 2

PPSD Kindergartners Requiring Intensive Early Literacy Support, 2007-2009 Average



Sources: PPSD, R2LP

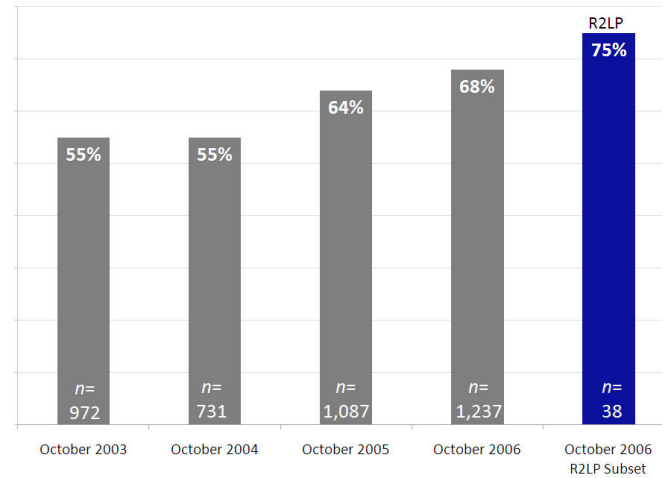
Scores Point to Positive Impact

R2LP's professional development investments began in 2003. By October 2005, improvements in early-literacy skills of PPSD kindergartners pointed to a positive impact of R2LP's efforts. (See Figure 3.) Between 2003 and 2006 the district witnessed an increase of 24% in the percentage of Providence children meeting benchmarks for early literacy upon kindergarten entry. A small subset of the kindergartners screened in October 2006 included children who had been enrolled in an early-care setting supported by R2LP's ERF program prior to kindergarten entry. This subset of children outperformed their peers, with 75% meeting early literacy benchmarks.

There is no established comparability between the DIBELS and PALS-K. Each instrument was developed uniquely and they share no similarities in scale or measurement. The findings presented here are intended only to demonstrate the trend in early-literacy skills of incoming kindergartners.

Figure 3

PPSD Kindergartners Meeting PALS-K Literacy Benchmarks, 2003-2006



Sources: PPSD, R2LP

The quantitative data confirm the overwhelming qualitative and anecdotal information that R2LP has collected over the past seven years from parents, providers and partners – that its programs are positively benefitting the children who need the most support in Providence and beyond.

Implications for Future Work

High-Quality Professional Development Makes a Difference

The findings in this report support R2LP's conviction that high-quality professional development – training that stresses depth, dosage and duration – can change the behaviors of educators and the outcomes of children. On-site mentoring, which provides the linkage between knowledge acquired in an academic setting and the actual implementation of that knowledge, is also crucial. While all the programs described in this report included a mentoring component, R2LP found that children in the programs with the most intensive mentoring support had the strongest outcomes.

Leadership Matters

When directors or head teachers took the classes themselves, provided intentional support to their teaching staff and fostered learning communities within their sites, results were stronger. The classroom environment and teaching strategies improved at greater rates.

All Learning Environments Benefit from Intervention

Findings such as those presented in this report confirm R2LP's commitment to a diverse-delivery early-care system. Data showed statistically significant growth in all learning environments – Head Start classrooms, community-based programs and family child-care homes – and among both English and Spanish speaking providers.

On-going Professional Support Is Needed to Sustain Growth

In our ECEPD program, family child-care providers made significant changes in their settings and teaching strategies as measured by the Child/Home Early Learning and Literacy Observation. Unlike center-based providers, however, family providers (who are more isolated professionally) did not sustain these changes when the intervention ended and there was no follow-up. It's a call for continued investment to support the early care and education workforce.

How We Conducted the Analyses

DIBELS analyses were facilitated through a data-sharing agreement between R2LP and the Providence Public School District (PPSD). This agreement enabled R2LP to link files of child-level data with DIBELS kindergarten assessment data for three academic years (2007-08, 2008-09, and 2009-10). Children were identified using a matching process based on each child's first and last names, and date of birth. Matches were cross-referenced with files from the Rhode Island Department of Education, during which additional demographic information about the children was obtained.

The DIBELS assessment was administered to approximately 5,000 PPSD students in 2007-08, 6,000 students in 2008-09 and 6,000 in 2009-10. Of these, R2LP identified roughly 170 children in the 2007-08 data set, 500 children in the 2008-09 data set, and 1,150 children in the 2009-10 data set who had participated in at least one of R2LP's interventions before they made the transition to elementary school. R2LP's interventions include Early Reading First I (2004-2007), Early Reading First II (2006-2010) and Early Childhood Educator Professional Development (2006-2010).

A caveat in reviewing these data is the dramatically different sample sizes between the R2LP and non-R2LP groups. Comparing R2LP and non-R2LP groups across a three-year average mitigates some of these differences. Additionally, R2LP tested the individual DIBELS measures using a procedure recommended by the U.S. Census Bureau (2009) when comparing estimates of a large group to a subset of that group. Results reveal that, in general, the testing occasion in which R2LP kindergartners appeared to consistently and significantly outscore non-R2LP kindergartners on individual DIBELS measures was during October of each year, with the exception of Initial Sound Fluency in October 2008. Thus, the early-literacy skills of R2LP kindergartners, as measured by DIBELS, seemed consistently greater than the skills of their non-R2LP peers when they first made the transition to kindergarten.

Additionally, and to account for any fundamental differences between R2LP and non-R2LP populations, R2LP examined three core characteristics of children: special education status, English-language learner status, and free or reduced lunch status (to serve as a proxy for socioeconomic status). Findings reveal that the socioeconomic status of students was comparable between the R2LP and non-R2LP groups. Each year and in every grade, approximately 90% of children in both groups qualified for free or reduced lunch. However, R2LP children tended to be identified as in need of special education at higher rates than their non-R2LP peers, particularly as kindergartners in 2007-08, first graders in 2008-09 and second graders in 2009-10. Finally, R2LP children tended to be identified as English-language learners at lower rates than their non-R2LP peers.

References

- Good, R.H., & Kaminski, R.A. (Eds.) (2002). *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (6th ed.). Eugene, OR: Institute for the Development of Educational Achievement. Retrieved from <http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>
- Invernizzi, M., Meier, J., Swank, L., & Juel, C. (2003) *Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening*. Richmond, VA: University of Virginia, Curry School of Education.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2009). *A compass for understanding and using American Community Survey data: What researchers need to know*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

Sources of Funding for R2LP Programs

Both Early Reading First (ERF) and Early Childhood Educator Professional Development (ECEPD) fall under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Education. ERF is a demonstration project that strives to develop centers of early learning excellence by working intensively, over a three-year period, with a relatively small number of educators. R2LP worked with 25 classrooms in nine different centers in its first two ERF programs.

ECEPD, a three-year professional development program and research study that got under way in February 2007, reached over 250 Head Start, center-based and home-based educators. Participating providers, who were randomly assigned to either a treatment group or a delayed treatment group, received at least two college-level courses in early-literacy instruction and six on-site visits from mentors over the course of one year.

Funds from the Early Learning Opportunities Act (ELOA) supported all of R2LP's activities from 2003 to 2005, including the training of some 400 Providence child-care providers in early-literacy instruction. The ELOA, administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was designed to increase, support, expand and better coordinate early learning opportunities for children and their families through community organizations.

For more information on R2LP and its programs, please go to www.r2lp.org

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Ready to Learn Providence is a program of
The Providence Plan
