



A Union of Professionals

AFT Innovation Fund

Union-District Partnership Strengthens Pre-K in St. Louis

Two years ago, in partnership with the American Federation of Teachers-St. Louis, the St. Louis Public Schools decided to double the capacity of its pre-K program. The district is now attracting families that otherwise would not have sent their young children to preschool—or even kindergarten. Along with the expansion has come a joint commitment from the district and the union to give pre-K teachers the training and resources they need to provide children with a high-quality early learning experience. With support from the AFT Innovation Fund and the Albert Shanker Institute, the district has begun to focus on creating a rich oral language environment for children, making the St. Louis pre-K program a model and contributing to growth in what had been another urban district with declining enrollment.

Albert Sanders used to tell his pre-K students to copy him if he wanted them to model his behavior. But now, his students understand words such as “mimic” and “imitate,” and they know that “cafeteria” and “lunchroom” mean the same thing.

“I don’t think there’s a word they can’t learn,” says Sanders, who is one of two pre-K teachers at Adams Elementary School in St. Louis.

Sitting on a blue rug in front of a Smart Board, his students watch as Sanders uses his finger to move some of their names from the “at school” column to the “at home” column. He asks what the names in the “at home” group have in common.

“All the people at home have seven letters in their name,” one girl proudly responds.

For Sanders, the morning attendance activity is another opportunity to encourage conversation.

“Eleven words,” he brags. “That’s like a fifth-grade sentence.”

TARGETED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Supporting the development of strong oral language skills in young children is just one of the topics Sanders has

been able to explore as part of a district-union professional development initiative specifically for pre-K teachers. The effort has been funded by a three-year grant to AFT-St. Louis from the AFT Innovation Fund, which supports collaborative district-union projects to improve teaching and learning.

Until 2011, pre-K teachers in the St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS) were not offered training that focused on teaching young children. If they attended workshops at all, they sat through those designed for elementary teachers and often struggled to adapt what they heard for their own classrooms, explains Yvette Levy, a pre-K teacher and vice president of AFT-St. Louis.

“They would be talking about the state assessment and we would think, ‘None of this applies to me,’ ” Levy says. “If we were pulled together, it was a one-stop shop type of thing.”

The Innovation Fund grant changed all that, and a working group was created to make decisions about which presentations and training topics would be most useful to the teachers. Members include pre-K teachers and teaching assistants, union officers and staffers, and district-level administrators. Initially, teachers were trained in Project Construct—the curriculum for the early childhood program—and in basic health and safety measures. As the project gelled, teachers began to create their own

professional development based on “best practices” in their classrooms.

As part of the grant, renowned early learning expert Barbara Bowman—who co-founded the Erikson Institute in Chicago and led the Chicago Public Schools’ early childhood education department until 2012—has served as the working group’s consultant, providing direction and guidance on instruction and assessment. She said she wanted to get involved in the project because the union was taking the lead.

“It was the union taking control of its own constituency’s development,” she says. “I found it reassuring that the union was saying, ‘We have a responsibility.’ ”

Every few months, pre-K teachers from across the district gather for training, for example, on how activity “centers” in the classroom, such as the housekeeping area or the science area, can be used to build children’s vocabulary and knowledge of the world.

Sanders says he finds the information on collecting and using data to be the most helpful, and says he can provide parents with much more specific information on their child’s progress.

Not only are the pre-K teachers receiving targeted support, but the sessions are also intended for paraprofessionals who work in pre-K, allowing them to build their teaching skills and work more collaboratively with the lead teachers.

“Now we are training together and we don’t have that disconnect,” Levy says. “Now there is someone else in the classroom who understands how a center connects to the curriculum piece.”

In Sander’s class, for example, teacher assistant Valerie Wells reads the students books on Thanksgiving while Sanders throws out questions about the characters.

THE PRE-K EXPANSION

AFT-St. Louis applied for and received the Innovation Fund grant in 2011, as the district was launching a major expansion of its pre-K program. After all, additional classrooms were just the first step; teachers also needed to be able to provide quality instruction.

Until 2011, the SLPS had about 1,200 to 1,300 students in pre-K. But both district and union leaders knew that there were far more children they could be serving. The problem was that they knew a lot of parents in the district weren’t even enrolling their children in school until the compulsory attendance age of 7.

So the district asked for permission to use some of the money remaining in a desegregation fund to open 25 new

pre-K classrooms and provide pre-K to more than 2,300 students. Under court order, the money was intended for new school construction, but since enrollment wasn’t growing, the need for new buildings never materialized.

Sheryl Davenport, then the director of early childhood, was in charge of getting the classrooms open on time and making sure preschoolers were there to fill them.

“We had to hire teachers, furnish classrooms and make sure they were all ready,” she says.

The district also launched a print, radio and TV advertising campaign to inform and attract parents to the new classes, noting that in addition to having fully certified teachers, the program also offers meals and before- and after-school care.

Drawing families into pre-K is also slowly helping to reverse declining enrollment. The number of students attending public school in St. Louis had dropped from more than 115,000 in the late ’60s to around 25,000 students when Kelvin Adams became superintendent in 2008. As leaders had hoped, families who send their children to pre-K are beginning to remain in St. Louis schools for kindergarten and the elementary grades, instead of departing for the suburbs, charter schools or other options. Enrollment is now up to 27,500, and officials are even discussing plans for a new school in a neighborhood with growing numbers of preschool-aged children.

The union was fully aware of the need to grow enrollment. Further, research by union officials Ray Cummings and Byron Clemens found that more than half of the 3- and 4-year-olds in the city weren’t taking advantage of any early childhood opportunities, including Head Start and day care.

The union saw the preschool expansion as a way to ensure that children were ready for academic success, notes Mary Armstrong, the president of AFT-St. Louis.

“More than half of the children entering kindergarten were ill-prepared,” Armstrong recalls. “Readiness and socialization skills were lacking or nonexistent. If these students were going to be able to read by the end of third grade, we needed to start earlier in preparing them to be literate and functional.”

Applying to the AFT Innovation Fund for a grant to create professional development uniquely suited to the needs of the expanding prekindergarten workforce was a natural choice for the AFT affiliate, given the national organization’s longstanding commitment to its members’ professional learning.

“Often times, pre-K teachers would be grouped with kindergarten teachers,” Armstrong says of the district’s

practice before the grant. “This was not addressing the needs of our teachers or teacher assistants.”

UNION-DISTRICT COLLABORATION

In a district that has been fighting to improve its reputation since losing state accreditation in 2007, the gains in pre-K enrollment are evidence of what can be accomplished through district-union collaboration and are part of the district’s drive to improve overall achievement and regain full accreditation.

“It’s a lot easier to do it with the union as a partner,” Adams says.

A special administrative board is in charge of the district, but the Missouri State Board of Education granted provisional accreditation in the fall of 2012.

The district’s efforts in early childhood education are also being held up as a positive example by Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon, a Democrat who has made expanding preschool a priority of his administration. In fact, on the same day he was sworn in for his second term in January of 2013, he met with early childhood educators and advocates to talk about his plans for increasing access to preschool. Adams and Linda Smith, the St. Louis district’s early childhood teacher of the year, were at the event. Nixon later recognized the district as a leader in this area during his State of the State speech.

“Under Dr. Adams’ strong leadership, the St. Louis schools have made steady progress over the past five years, as they work to earn full accreditation,” the governor said. “That kind of progress is only possible when everyone pulls together toward a shared goal.”

Even though parents are enrolling their children in pre-K, Adams says many still need to learn how important it is for their children to attend on a consistent basis.

“Many families see it as a babysitting service,” he says, adding that the district is enforcing an attendance requirement and will take slots away from those who treat the program like a drop-in day care service.

Sanders’ class experiences this pattern almost every day. A dad walks in with his son while the rest of the class is off at art. School starts at 8, but it’s already almost 10.

“That’s a lot of learning he misses every day,” Sanders says about the boy.

THE EMPHASIS ON CHILDREN’S ORAL LANGUAGE

The expansion of pre-K, the union-management partnership that led to it and the dedicated professional

development time for pre-K teachers also caught the attention of the Albert Shanker Institute, which has long made early learning one of its priorities. The institute had been looking for a district in which to conduct a large-scale implementation of its teacher-training program aimed at expanding children’s oral language and vocabulary skills, and approached AFT-St. Louis President Armstrong about working in the city. The strength of the district’s labor-management partnership convinced the organization to underwrite the full cost of implementation.

“We know a lot of teachers are not predisposed to teaching content, but everyone agrees that oral language is a critical feature,” explains Susan Neuman, a professor of teaching and learning at New York University, a former assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Education and a highly respected expert on children’s literacy development.

“Oral language is a crucial foundation for all later academic learning,” says Burnie Bond, the Albert Shanker Institute’s director of programs. “Listening and speaking are the primary means by which young children interact with and learn about the world, the way they express their thoughts, ideas and feelings.” But children’s exposure to words and ideas can vary a great deal from home to home, explains Bond.

“It’s been shown that, by the time they enter school, children from more advantaged backgrounds may know as many as 15,000 more words than their less affluent peers. But it’s not just a matter of words. It’s the background knowledge, the exposure to ideas and information that these words represent. If children don’t already know a large percentage of the words and ideas they encounter in text, they won’t be able to comprehend the books they read as they move through school. So that early word gap becomes a learning gap and an achievement gap.”

Neuman worked with the Albert Shanker Institute to design the oral language development program, which trains teachers in the most effective ways to expand children’s background knowledge and vocabulary—for example, by providing ideas on how to make reading informational texts out loud to children engaging and hopefully correcting any assumptions that low-income children can’t acquire content knowledge. Because the approaches and materials are aligned to the Common Core State Standards, the training also supports the district’s Common Core implementation efforts. The first two-day seminar was delivered during the summer of 2012. A second seminar and more intensive follow-up training were provided in the summer of 2013.

“The teachers are incredibly receptive,” Neuman says. “They are very eager to learn.”

The institute's work with the district also includes an evaluation component intended to give district and union leaders valuable feedback on what the teachers are learning and to identify areas that need further improvement.

Neuman worked with colleagues to develop a classroom-quality measure called the Preschool Educational Environmental Rating System, or PEERS, which was used to determine baseline levels of quality in classrooms paid for by different sources of funding. Currently, pre-K classrooms in the district are provided through four main funding streams—general operating dollars, Title I, magnet school funding and Head Start.

Initial data collection showed that Title I and magnet school classrooms generally had the highest level of quality, in terms of both the overall learning environment and instruction. Head Start classrooms, however, were weak in “responsive instruction,” and parent involvement was found to be “surprisingly limited.”

When the researchers sampled children's literacy scores, they found Head Start students lagging behind those in the other types of classrooms in vocabulary, letter recognition and letter-sound awareness. To Neuman, the findings confirmed that a “content-rich oral language” approach is clearly what is most needed in the district's pre-K classrooms.

Neuman returned to St. Louis in the fall of 2013 to train 10 teachers who will participate in an oral language intervention, using “text sets” on topics such as autumn and dinosaurs to expose children to more sophisticated high-value vocabulary.

“We're not trying to just teach words,” she explains to the group. “We're trying to teach networks of words” that will build children's knowledge and show them how words and concepts are connected.

The teachers will also receive coaching and support from Shanker Institute-trained colleagues in the district who will help support the teachers as they work to encourage children's oral-language skills.

CONTINUING AND SUSTAINING PROGRESS

While Davenport, who spent 36 years in the district, oversaw the rapid expansion of pre-K, it is now her successor Paula Knight's charge to work toward a higher and consistent level of quality across all pre-K classrooms in the district.

“Early childhood education teachers need to understand that this is no longer business as usual,” says Knight, who is setting specific instructional targets for classrooms and

making sure teachers are aware of the pre-K curriculum and how it aligns with the Common Core standards in English language arts and math.

She is also leaning on the working group members to be leaders in their schools and to provide ongoing support to other teachers.

“They have really paved the way in helping teachers understand that oral language is critical to reading and writing,” she says.

Levy agrees that the working group has made the transition in leadership a smoother process and that Knight has “used the working group to her advantage.”

With the AFT Innovation Fund grant running out in 2014, discussions are also beginning to focus on how the district can continue to support pre-K teachers' professional growth and offer a high-quality public pre-K program.

The first step is for Superintendent Adams and the school board to make a commitment to providing targeted training to pre-K teachers and paraprofessionals, whether or not there is a grant, says Kathy Blanke, who teaches pre-K and is also the union steward at Woodward Elementary.

Second, Davenport, Bowman and several teachers recommend keeping the working group intact even after the grant expires. Bowman—who will be writing a five-year plan for the district as a guide—also thinks officials should continue to support pre-K teacher leaders, allowing them to take some of the responsibility for providing ongoing professional development at their schools.

BENEFITS BEYOND PRE-K

The district's and the union's dedication to expanding and improving early childhood education in St. Louis is also having ripple effects outside of pre-K.

For example, the district is now hoping to share its knowledge and resources with community-based preschool providers—some of which have been negatively affected by the expansion of free services within the district.

“We are working on building a partnership with the mom and pops and day cares,” Adams says, regretting that some of the providers even closed down because they lost enrollment. “We look like we were trying to put people out of business.”

To repair relations, the district wants to open pre-K staff development opportunities to local providers and might even place teachers in those community sites to offer support and expertise.

The district's emphasis on early learning is also changing ways that the district previously did business. For example, getting principals to agree to release pre-K teachers and paraprofessionals to attend their own staff development took some work, explains Davenport.

"That was a fight for some principals, but once they saw what we were doing and that it was important and relevant, they came full circle," she says. In fact, now many principals are turning to their pre-K staff to demonstrate project-based lessons and other instructional strategies for teachers in higher grades.

In a related move, principals in the district have also been instructed to stop pulling top-notch teachers out of pre-K and moving them into other elementary grades.

Furthermore, in keeping with what child development experts consider the early childhood years, grades K-2 are now considered part of the district's early childhood department. K-2 teachers will be able to attend the early childhood professional development sessions, laying the foundation for more collaboration across pre-K and the primary grades and creating continuity for young children as they transition between the grades.

"This will be a much broader and richer experience for those teachers," Davenport says.

Soon, even teachers outside of St. Louis will be able to benefit from what the district's pre-K teachers are learning. Videos of model instructional practices are being created and will be posted on Share My Lesson, an AFT website offering free teaching resources created by and for teachers. Bowman recorded an introduction to the videos, explaining how they are the result of a partnership between the district and the union.

Davenport agrees that the challenge before the district is to continue to improve the quality of instruction across all pre-K classrooms. But she also reflects on the tremendous strides that have been made because of the collaborative relationship between the district and the union.

"This is the Titanic, and we're not moving it in a day," she says. "But we are changing a lot of folks' perceptions of early childhood education."



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