Quality Counts in Public 4K Classrooms

Cradle-to-Career Outcome Focus: Kindergarten Readiness

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Challenge: As public preschool programs have expanded through state investment, the full potential of preschool programming is yet to be realized in later grades. The inclination to expand the investment more quickly to serve more students has rightly been preempted by a desire to improve the quality through pilot programs first. In Spartanburg, “Quality Counts” has long worked with private child care providers to improve quality, but has not to date applied their standards to public preschool programs. A statewide grant opportunity allowed Quality Counts to pilot their work at Cleveland Academy of Leadership, a public elementary school in Spartanburg’s District 7, during the 2016-17 academic year.

Hypothesis: Given Quality Counts’ history of improving private child care program quality, the hypothesis of this pilot project was that it would have a similar impact on public preschool classrooms.

Intervention Design: Spartanburg’s Quality Counts began its work by hosting several introductory sessions with the Cleveland 4K classroom teachers, assistants, and leadership staff, building a foundational understanding of early childhood brain science and the components of high quality learning environments. Quality Counts then assigned a technical assistance provider (TA) to work closely with Cleveland teachers to assess their classroom environments using the evidence-based “Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale – Third Edition” (ECERS-3). The TA and teachers purchased new equipment and supplies for the classrooms and created continuous improvement plans based on the assessment results. Throughout the school year, Quality Counts provided opportunities for targeted professional development, one-on-one coaching, and additional assessments such as the “Classroom Assessment Scoring System” (CLASS) to drive quality improvements. The TA visited the school regularly, checking in with teachers and offering assistance.

Data Collection and Analysis: Quantitative data related to classroom quality improvement and student success measures were collected. Quality Counts also tracked TA visits and professional development offerings. Classroom quality and teacher interaction were measured using ECERS-3 and CLASS, with growth determined based on pre- and post-scores. The ECERS-3 tool measures classroom quality in five areas: space/furnishings, personal care routines, language/literacy, interactions, and program structure. CLASS measures teacher/student interactions in three categories: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Student success was determined with pre- and post-scores utilizing the PALS PRE-K assessment, the District’s chosen early literacy assessment.

Findings and Results: Pre- and post-assessments in classroom quality measures showed very substantial improvements. The average ECERS-3 score improved in every category, ranging from 40% to 115% (see chart on the reverse side). Within each category, individual teachers experienced varied growth, some exhibiting over 100% growth in nearly every category. Growth in the CLASS scores is typically expected to be slower. Even so, teachers at Cleveland demonstrated improvements between 6% and 16% in each category (see chart on the reverse side). Again, there were variations among the three classrooms, with some improving more than 25% overall and more than 60% in some categories. A most noteworthy result came to light as student outcomes were explored. To date, working exclusively across private child care, Quality Counts has not had access to data examining impact on student outcomes as distinct from classroom and center-based quality outcomes.

2 See www.SpartanburgQualityCounts.org ... an initiative that supports continuous quality improvement in early care and education programs with the goal that all children arrive at school prepared for kindergarten success supported by Spartanburg County First Steps and the Mary Black Foundation.
In reviewing pre- and post-data for students participating in the Cleveland 4K program during the year of Quality Counts work, students grew 65% more than the previous year’s group of students in measures of early literacy skills on the PALS Pre-K assessment. This increase in average post-score was higher than among students participating in the district’s other 4K programs. Not only did students at Cleveland grow more during the year than students had in the previous year, but their post-scores were the highest even after starting nearly 20 points behind peers. Student growth in PALS Pre-K is illustrated below.

**Implications:** Based on the results of Quality Counts’ work with three classrooms at Cleveland, the SC Education Oversight Committee has awarded two additional grants to expand this work to Spartanburg’s District 3 and District 7’s Early Learning Center at Park Hills. Further, Quality Counts has modified their traditional delivery model given their experience with this public sector pilot project, namely emphasizing the assessment of classroom quality, teacher/student interactions, and consistent technical assistance and professional development.

**Conclusions:** The implications of this work are significant. Research linking high quality learning environments with kindergarten readiness outcomes, early grade reading outcomes, and outcomes for middle schoolers and beyond validates Quality Counts’ approach as a major opportunity to impact SAM’s cradle to career outcomes from kindergarten readiness onward. The gains that have been exhibited in learning environments and student outcomes, plus the replicability of the model and its positive reception by teachers suggest that it is a strategy that – if spread to as many early childhood learning environments as possible – will positively affect cradle to career outcomes.

**SAM Partners Engaged in this Research:** School District 7, SAM Kindergarten Success Collaborative Action Network members/staff: Beth Thompson, Dr. Glen Carson, Barbara Manoski with Spartanburg Quality Counts, the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee, and School District 3.

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